Traces

The UNC-Chapel Hill Journal of History

Volume 14

2026

Traces

The UNC-Chapel Hill Journal of History

Volume 14

2026

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Published in the United States of America
by the UNC-Chapel Hill History Department

Pauli Murray Hall, CB #3195
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3195
(919) 962-2115
history@unc.edu
traces@unc.edu

Printed in the United States of America by University of North Carolina Press.

Traces is the annual publication produced by the undergraduate and graduate students of the History Department at UNC-Chapel Hill. Its purpose is to showcase students' historical research. Traces was created in 2011 by UNC-Chapel Hill students G. Lawson Kuehnert and Mark W. Hornburg, with support from the UNC-Chapel Hill Parents Council.

Traces: The UNC-Chapel Hill Journal of History is affiliated with the Delta Pi chapter (UNC-Chapel Hill) of Phi Alpha Theta, the National History Honor Society.

Cover: "Photograph, anti-war demonstrations on Franklin Street (Anne Queen at left)," in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Image Collection, Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill. Reproduction courtesy of North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

A Letter from the Managing Editor

The staff at *Traces: The UNC-Chapel Hill Journal History* is excited to share this year's volume. As I wrap up my tenure as the Managing Editor, it is my pleasure to have a final opportunity to thank the many people that make this journal possible. Thanks, first of all, to our dedicated undergraduate staff members. They do the vital work of selecting and peer reviewing articles each year, and I am always thankful for their insightful feedback and diligence. Thanks also to the Editorial Board for helping manage the journal. Hooper Schultz, William C. Raby, Alec J. Blaylock, and Uzoma Samuel Osuala managed the book review selection and editorial process, for which I'm very grateful. Thanks also to Alec (A.J.) for helping with the layout and to Will for finding the cover image. Additional thanks to Katherine (Thryn) Hager for doing the paperwork that lets us be an official campus organization. And many thanks to Prof. Kathleen DuVal for her support as our Faculty Advisor.

Beyond this, a small but mighty group of people do the administrative and production tasks that make managing the journal a breeze. Of these people, Sam Louie-Meador's commitment to supporting undergraduates and the journal always deserves special mention. Thanks, Sam! Many thanks are also owed to another Sam, Sam Dalzell at the Office of Scholarly Publishing Services at UNC Press, for handling the ins-and-outs of producing the physical copies of the journal. Wilson Library houses one of the best collections in the world, and we are thankful that we can access its archive and work with its staff to help find and reproduce our cover images each year. Many thanks, also, to this year's authors for contributing ten excellent articles and four superb book reviews to this volume. I speak for the whole staff when I say it was a pleasure working with all of you throughout the publication process. Finally, thank you to the History Department and its donors for covering the cost of publication. We truly couldn't do this work and present this volume without their support.

In our current moment defined by conflicts around the world and cuts to area studies programs at UNC-CH, it feels inadequate and cliché to say that historical education matters. It feels equally inadequate and cliché to invoke some of the most well-known arguments about why history matters: history rhymes or echoes; we need to learn from the past to avoid repeating it; and William Faulkner's claim that "the past is never dead. It's not even past." But, as this year's cover image demonstrates, all these claims speak to something true. The engaging work you will find within serves as a reminder that the past always shapes the world in which we live. We have a responsibility to each other to learn from this past and to imagine a more just and peaceful future. I hope this issue, in its own small way, helps us do both.

With gratitude for all,

Aaron Pattillo-Lunt

Traces

The UNC-Chapel Hill Journal of History

Articles

Book Reviews

“The Most Truly Eugenic Method”: Birth Control, Racial Hierarchy, and New Deal Reproductive Politics

Riley Allen
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

Abstract: This paper examines the intersection of birth control, eugenic ideology and New Deal social policy in the United States during the Great Depression era. While birth control has often been framed as a means of expanding women’s autonomy, it has also functioned as a tool of government-sponsored social control, helping to reinforce racial and class-based hierarchies. Using a combination of policy documents, public health records, correspondence between key figures, and existing historical scholarship, this study analyzes how reproductive policies were integrated into federal and state welfare programs, as well as the motivations behind these initiatives. The findings demonstrate that government programs, including state-sponsored birth control clinics and health initiatives through the Farm Security Administration, disproportionately and maliciously targeted poor women and women of color, while promoting reproductive “rehabilitation” among white populations, suggesting that Depression-era reproductive policy was deeply shaped by eugenic thought. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of racial inequity in women’s healthcare and the development of American healthcare policy in the years following the economic collapse of 1929.

When the United States fell into economic collapse during the 1930s, many Americans sought explanations for the failure of the nation. One such group involved a collection of reformers, scientists, and others who, influenced by eugenic thought, argued that the Great Depression had been in part caused by the “overreproduction of the poor.”[1] These supporters of eugenics argued that “feeble-mindedness” and hereditary weakness contributed to the widespread poverty in the United States. Early on, prominent birth control advocates and eugenicists alike framed the Depression as a symptom of the country’s biological decline, claiming that the reproduction of “unfit” individuals such as poor Southern women, immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, and families of color, had overwhelmed the nation’s welfare system.[2]

1 Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America,* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 234.
2 Ashley C. Lancaster. *The Angelic Mother and the Predatory Seductress: Poor*

Eugenicists and social reformers argued that selective reproduction, whether through birth control or sterilization, could restore economic balance and morality to American society. As Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell argued in their edited collection on the history of eugenics, the "combined ideal of strengthening the race and preserving the family held great public appeal" during the Great Depression and "paved the way for public acceptance of New Deal social liberalism and its sacrifice of liberty for the sake of stability."[3] Many Americans saw a return to traditional family values as a way to save the nation, and as the federal government assumed responsibility for family welfare through New Deal policies, eugenic ideals were reflected in certain laws and public health programs.

Margaret Sanger, often referred to as the "mother" of the birth control movement, was widely viewed in the early 20th century as a "feisty socialist and militant feminist."[4] Yet the motivations behind her activism are complex. Sanger attributed her mother's early death to constant childbearing and lack of access to contraceptives. She began working as a nurse in Manhattan which exposed her to the immense need to bring birth control services to poor women in the city, prompting her to open the first birth control clinic in the United States. Shortly after, she founded the American Birth Control League (ABCL) in 1921, which later became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.[5] In the late 1920s, however, Sanger increasingly aligned the ABCL with eugenicists, in an effort to gain legitimacy for the birth control movement. She promoted the idea that America needed "more children from the fit, less from the unfit," and framed the ABCL's mission as one that would "elevate the function of motherhood" so that "a race of well-born children" might be "create[d]."[6]

The term "eugenics" was first used by Sir Francis Galton to mean "well-born," and was centered around the thought that society could be improved by encouraging reproduction among those considered genetically "fit," later referred to as "positive eugenics." By the early twentieth century, however, "negative eugenics," or the practice of strategically reducing certain "undesirable" traits in a population, gained traction notably among American and German social scientists. This ideology was fueled by fears of "race degenera-

White Women in Southern Literature of the Great Depression (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 9.

3 Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell, eds. *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s,* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

4 Elaine T. May, *America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation,* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 17.

5 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 215.

6 *Birth Control: What it is, How it Works, What it Will Do; The Proceedings of the First American Birth Control Conference* (New York: The Birth Control Review, 1922).

tion" and "race suicide," which would presumably cause a decline in national vitality. Eugenic ideas were incorporated into mainstream popular culture through educational campaigns, media, and events such as "Fitter Family" and "Better Baby" contests aimed at promoting reproduction among the "best" members of society, but also into national policies surrounding immigration restriction and sterilization laws. Within this prominent scientific and political movement, Sanger saw an opportunity to marry the birth control movement to the already prominent eugenics movement, framing contraception as an avenue for women's autonomy, but also a tool for social engineering. This paper argues that birth control policy was situated at the intersection of New Deal welfare programs and eugenic thought, which resulted in a system that expanded contraceptive access, but also reinforced racial and class hierarchies. By sponsoring birth control programs that aimed to provide rehabilitation and autonomy to white women while controlling the reproductive decisions of poor women and women of color, federal and state programs integrated eugenic logic into the foundations of public health policy during the Great Depression.

Before the Depression

Political and legal decisions in the years preceding the stock market crash established the ideological and institutional groundwork that made racialized reproductive control possible during the Great Depression. A key barrier to education regarding reproduction was the federal Comstock Act of 1873, which criminalized the mailing of "obscene" materials including contraceptives and information about contraception.[7] While wealthy white women were able to visit private physicians, poor women, women living in rural areas, and women of color, who were less likely to have regular access to healthcare, were effectively denied access to information about reproductive control options. Although state boards of health were mandated to care for both Black and white patients, services were usually reserved for white individuals, and in extremely poor rural counties, "the physician-to-population ratio exceeded 1 to 20,000, and some areas had no practicing physicians at all."[8]

Margaret Sanger, aware of these disparities from her time as a nurse in Manhattan, began publishing and distributing a newspaper titled *The Woman Rebel* in 1914 with the aim of "stimulat[ing] working women to think for themselves and build up a conscious fighting character" and to "advocate the prevention of conception and to impart such knowledge in the columns of this paper."[9]

---

7 May, *America and the Pill,* 18.

8 Johanna Schoen, *Choice & Coercion, Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 25.

9 Margaret Sanger, *The Woman Rebel* (New York: Drawn & Quarterly, 1914), 10.

However, her efforts were quickly derailed when she was issued a nine-count indictment for violating the Comstock laws.[10] The Comstock Act's enforcement entrenched birth control's reputation as inappropriate, and an avenue to the female promiscuity which threatened the very fabric of society.

At the same time, the Supreme Court's ruling in Buck v. Bell (1927) upheld a law from Virginia which authorized the sterilization of institutionalized and imprisoned people, and legally protected the right of the state to make reproductive decisions for women, particularly targeting poor and nonwhite women.[11] Justice Holmes declared in the majority opinion that the law was justified to prevent the nation from "being swamped with incompetence," and that "three generations of imbeciles are enough" in reference to Carrie Buck, a mental institution patient set to be sterilized, whose "condition" had been present in her family for three generations.[12]

The decision in Buck v. Bell paved the way for more than 60,000 forced sterilizations to be performed across the country from the 1920s to 1970s.[13] By the early 1930s, more than thirty states had enacted their own sterilization laws. Most compulsory sterilization state laws were based on the Model Eugenical Sterilization Law, which allowed the sterilization of "tuberculosis," "infectious," "orphans," "homeless," and "paupers" among others, "regardless of etiology or prognosis."[14] California became the national leader in sterilizations conducted by state institutions, and in the South, the "Mississippi appendectomy," or the forced sterilization of Black women, often without their knowledge, with the intention of preventing "undesirables" from reproducing, was common.[15] T.O. Powell, president of the American Medico-Psychological Association, claimed in 1897 that "Before the [Civil War] there were, comparatively speaking, few negro lunatics. Following their sudden emancipation their number of insane began to multiply, and, as accumulating statistics show, the number is now

---

10 May, *America and the Pill,* 18.

11 "Buck V. Bell." Oyez. Accessed April 5, 2026. https://www.oyez.org/cases/1900-1940/274us200.

12 Oliver Wendell Holmes and Supreme Court of the United States. U.S. Reports: Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200. 1926. Periodical. https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep274200/. 200.

13 Carole R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 63.

14 Johanna Schoen, "The State and Women's Sexuality: The Birth Control and Sterilization Program in North Carolina, 1929–75," MA Thesis, (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1989), 14.

15 Sarah Averbach, Diana Ha, Audra Meadows, Linda Brubaker, and Cynthia Gyamfi-Bannerman. "Failure to Progress: Structural Racism in Women's Health-care," *eClinicalMedicine* 57, (2023). Accessed April 5, 2026. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2023.101861.

alarmingly large and on the increase."[16] Similar sentiments were echoed by physicians and asylum superintendents well into the twentieth century, and by the time the Depression hit America, sterilization was accepted as a policy tool and as a means to reduce poverty and hereditary "degeneracy," particularly among women of color and poor women.

During this same period, birth control activists began to embrace eugenic ideology, and made strides to align their movement with widely accepted scientific and political ideas that framed eugenics as a pathway to national improvement and a means of maintaining racial hierarchy. National attention to declining birthrates among native-born Americans fueled widespread fears of "race suicide" and intensified concerns about the quantity of the population, but also its biological quality. Debates about population size and infant mortality joined broader discourse about the health of the nation, and many began to treat the quantity and quality of babies being born as a measure of national strength and survival.[17]

After the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act, a federally funded social welfare program intended to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates, in 1921, the American Birth Control League attempted to integrate contraception into federal health programs.[18] However, repeated failures pushed Margaret Sanger and her allies to seek out partnerships with prominent eugenicists with the intention of distancing the birth control movement from the sexual context in which it was widely viewed. While many eugenicists vehemently supported the movement, with many holding positions with the American Birth Control League and Clinical Research Bureau, some opposed birth control, concerned that providing women with a choice in reproductive decisions may lead to "race suicide" among the "fit" Nordic-Teutonic race, and that the poor, "unfit" groups would be too irresponsible to correctly use contraception.[19] However, both birth controllers and eugenicists agreed that uncontrolled fertility was poised at the center of the problems facing the United States, "and birth control [was] really the greatest and most truly eugenic method."[20]

The Great Depression and the Crisis of Reproduction

With the stock market crash came the emergence of a prominent

---

16 "Proceedings of the American Medico-Psychological Association at the Fifty-Third Annual Meeting, Held in Baltimore, May 11th—14th, 1897 (Published by the Association)." *Journal of Mental Science* 45, no. 190 (1899): 575–79. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.45.190.575.

17 Susan J. Pearson, *The Birth Certificate: An American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 96.

18 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 225.

19 McCann, *Birth Control Politics,* 122.

20 McCann, *Birth Control Politics,* 125.

national narrative which linked economic collapse and instability to the "overreproduction of the poor."[21] Many public figures, including birth control advocates and eugenicists, suggested that widespread dependence on relief was due to the genetic weakness of the poor. Eleanor Jones, the president of the American Birth Control League until 1935, famously characterized the Depression as the "dysgenic multiplication of the unfit," and believed that "bad heredity" posed an "insurmountable obstacle to the achievement of social welfare."[22]

Eugenic logic and the promotion of birth control methods quickly became embedded in analyses of both the causes of the Depression, and avenues to relief. The Human Betterment Foundation, a prominent pro-sterilization organization in California, distributed pamphlets praising sterilization as one of the "greatest advances in modern civilization," arguing that reducing the fertility of the "unfit" would ease tax burdens on citizens and improve public welfare.[23] American eugenicist Clarence C. Little demanded birth control as an end to the "present tendency that pays money to non-productive and idle persons" and writers like Fred Hogue, who authored the weekly column Social Eugenics in the *Los Angeles Times*, praised Japanese, Swedish, and German population control policies, arguing in favor of eliminating "defectives" who were mentally impaired, insane, or chronically poor.[24] While these statements are grounded in eugenic logic, data from the 1930s found that families dependent on welfare had birth rates 50-60 percent higher than those of families not on relief.[25] Population biologist Raymond Pearl said in a 1934 progress report that this disparity in reproduction rates was "due primarily to ignorance of contraceptive methods and technique, rather than a desire to have large families." He concluded that "prompt removal of all legal restrictions to the free dissemination of contraceptive information, and barriers to the unrestricted distribution of contraceptive devices, would tend to have the effect of bringing the differential fertility of social classes more neatly into balance again."[26] In this environment, eugenics and birth control became seen by many as solutions to poverty and the economic turmoil plaguing the nation.

During this time, many women, particularly those who struggled finan-

21 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 234.

22 McCann, *Birth Control Politics,* 180.

23 Human Betterment Foundation. *Human Sterilization Today.* Pasadena: Human Betterment Foundation, 1938. https://www.loc.gov/item/2020783595/. 1-8.

24 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 214; Fred Hogue. "Shall the Unfit Weaken the Race?" Los Angeles Times, April 14, 1935, http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/shall-unfit-weaken-race/docview/163344472/se-2.

25 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 213.

26 Raymond Pearl. "Second Progress Report on a Study of Family Limitation." *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1934): 269. https://doi.org/10.2307/3347894

cially and with frequent pregnancies, sought birth control as a means of survival. When a column in the Columbus Citizen newspaper published Sanger's address as a source for birth control information, she received over 500 letters in just a few days.[27] One woman wrote "I have 8 children and the oldest is 14. My husband works on relief, because his job is shut down… Please tell me the secret about birth control. When you write about it, please write to me in plain words because I don't know what it means in big words."[28] Demand for contraception was reflected in consumer trends of the 1930s as well, with Americans spending an estimated $25 million on condoms in 1936.[29] The same year, a nationwide survey regarding attitudes of Americans towards birth control found that 76% of people surveyed favored access to birth control.[30] Some women even self-organized, with members of the Working Women's Council in Patterson, New Jersey organizing to establish a local birth control clinic in their town.[31]

Although eugenicists, birth control advocates, and women themselves seeking relief wanted contraception for different reasons, the Depression uncovered high rates of fertility and the need for birth control as an urgent national issue. With the New Deal's expansion of federal responsibility over family welfare, advocates urged President Roosevelt to create a national policy on birth control. However, the process to officially legalize birth control and integrate contraception into public policy was difficult, and at the expense of marginalized women.

Legal and Ideological Struggles

Despite growing public demand during the Depression, birth controllers faced significant opposition in their efforts to incorporate birth control into federal welfare and public health programs. One of the most significant obstacles that likely influenced these struggles was the continued association of birth control with sexual promiscuity and radical liberalism. In 1930 and again in 1937, the American Birth Control League hired a public relations consulting firm, which determined that Sanger's "radical reputation" was hindering the movement.[32] Her earlier activism, specifically the controversy surrounding The Woman Rebel, and the perception that her work actively threatened traditional family values, made her a target for religious and conservative critics. Additionally, institutional factors seemed to influence the lack of federal support for birth control more strongly than widespread opinion, as interest in contraception had grown immensely over the course of the 1930s. In 1934, the American Birth

27 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 225.
28 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 225.
29 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 223.
30 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 223.
31 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 224.
32 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 221.

Control League sent a caseworker to visit relief administrators in the South and gauge possible interest in contraceptive education and dispersal programs. She found that although they were enthusiastic about birth control, they were not authorized to make changes in their counties.[33] Additionally, a 1935 survey of Federal Emergency Relief Administration staff found that not one administrator would admit to giving contraceptive advice, reflecting persisting fears surrounding the usage and distribution of birth control.[34]

Sensitive political dynamics impacted President Roosevelt's lack of motivation to formally endorse contraception, despite pressure from birth controllers and eugenicists alike who viewed it as essential to national economic recovery. Margaret Sanger left the ABCL and formed the National Committee on Federal Legislation on Birth Control in 1929, intending to nullify the Comstock Act and incorporate reproductive care into welfare programs, but her efforts failed to influence any legislation in Washington.[35] Sanger attacked both Roosevelt and the New Deal, accusing the President of falling to Catholic pressure against birth control, saying "As long as the procreative instinct is allowed to run reckless riot through our social structure… as long as the New Deal and our paternalistic administration refuse to recognize this truism, grandiose schemes for security may eventually turn into subsidies for the perpetuation of the irresponsible classes of society."[36] The Catholic Church did play a major role in stalling federal action in reproductive policy, as Pope Pius XI's 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii* condemned artificial contraception as a violation of divine law.[37] Because Catholics made up significant percentages of the population in urban areas like New York, Chicago, and Boston, the Roosevelt administration was hesitant to take an official position on birth control.

Finally, in the late 1930s, the birth control movement saw significant advancements in both legality and legitimacy. In 1937, the American Medical Association (AMA) endorsed birth control, thus assisting the movement in a professional capacity.[38] In 1936, the Comstock Act was weakened by *United States v. One Package of Japanese Pessaries*, which lifted the federal ban on birth control, allowing for expanded education programs and the foundation of

33 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 220.
34 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 220.
35 Debra Michals, "Margaret Sanger." National Women's History Museum. 2017. www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/margaret-sanger.
36 May, *America and the Pill,* 21.
37 Scott Wright, "Roman Catholic Church Reaffirms Its Position Against Birth Control." *EBSCO*, 2023. https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/roman-catholic-church-reaffirms-its-position-against
38 Mary S. Melcher, *Pregnancy, Motherhood, and Choice in Twentieth-century Arizona* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 58.

additional birth control clinics.[39] The United States Court of Appeals ruled that bans on the distribution of contraception did not apply to physicians prescribing them to patients for life saving reasons or to promote the well-being of women.[40]

Prior to this, physicians hesitated to provide contraceptive advice or services to their patients, largely due to fear of prosecution, but with official backing from the AMA and the end of obscenity laws, doctors took on expanded roles and aided in the proliferation of the movement.[41] Toward the end of the 1930s, the American Birth Control League and Margaret Sanger's Clinical Research Bureau merged to form the Birth Control Federation of America (BCFA), which shifted the movement's strategy away from federal legal battles and toward the distribution of contraception through state and informal federal programs that often perpetuated eugenic ideas and worked to maintain racial stratification in the United States.

State Birth Control Programs

Although private birth control clinics operated in the United States as early as the 1920s, continued pressures of unrelenting poverty and fears of "overreproduction of the unfit" prompted states to begin sponsoring public birth control programs in the late 1930s. Southern states became unlikely pioneers of contraception, offering services exclusively to indigent women. North Carolina was the first state to expand access to reproductive healthcare in 1937, with South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida following shortly after.[42] Yet as Linda Gordon argues, "the South's innovation in government-sponsored birth control was conditioned not only by the absence of large Catholic constituencies but, more importantly, by racism."[43] This was reflected in the stated goals of North Carolina's program: to "reduce the high infant death rate and the loss of mothers' lives," to "create an awareness of the importance of proper spacing of all future children as the prerequisite for healthful and happy family life through proper spacing of children," and, notably, to "increase the birth rate among the intellectually and financially competent and physically fit."[44]

State birth control clinics mainly served poor women, especially poor Black mothers. Black families generally had higher birth rates in the South and were among the groups most devastated by the Depression, leading to

39 Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 32.

40 *United States v. One Package*, 86 F.2d 737 (2d Cir. 1936)

41 Roy Norton, "A Health Department Birth Control Program," *American Journal of Public Health* 29, no. 3 (1939): 254.

42 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 233.

43 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 233.

44 Schoen, "The State and Women's Sexuality," 22.

a perceived need to limit Black women's capacity for reproduction.[45] Birth control advocates and eugenic reformers frequently justified these policies by contending that limiting fertility among the poor would reduce the financial burden on taxpayers.[46] This argument was particularly salient during the Depression, when fears surrounding abuse of welfare money and growing costs of public relief intensified calls to limit the "uncontrolled" reproduction of unfit families.

Although state programs aimed "to give contraceptive advice only to medically indigent mothers," their treatment of these mothers was inconsistent depending on a patient's race.[47] In some states, maternal and infant care educational material was mailed only to parents presumed to be literate, which was likely determined by proxies such as race or neighborhood, effectively directing resources toward already more advantaged families.[48] In Miami, Florida, separate clinics were established for Black and white women, and Dr. Lydia Allen DeVilbiss often prescribed different contraceptive devices for each, claiming that Black women had lower intelligence and therefore could not be entrusted with complex birth control methods.[49] She wrote in 1923 that "the aim of accessible, legal, and affordable birth control is not necessarily to help the plight of impoverished, marginalized communities. Rather, it is intended to make sure that they can utilize birth control and therefore procreate less."[50] Dr. Allen DeVilbiss eliminated funding for the Black women's clinic after witnessing Black mothers ignoring the "advice" of white directors, saying "Our colored clinic did not turn out the way we thought it would so it should not be mentioned this time [on the ABCL list of affiliated clinics] … I wonder if southern darkies can ever be entrusted with such a clinic. Our experience causes us to doubt their ability to work except under white supervision."[51] A fundraising letter from the Miami Mothers Health Clinic, which was later supported by the city health department and the Public Health Nursing Service, plainly connected the birth control program to eugenic aims:

> "Dear Friend and Taxpayer, You were taxed in round numbers TWO MILLION DOLLARS for the care of the pauper, indigent sick and the criminal classes in Dade County for 1933… 500 indigent mothers in Dade County have been instructed in eugenic birth regulations."[52]

45 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 233.
46 Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 22.
47 Norton, A Health Department Birth Control Program, 254.
48 Pearson, *The Birth Certificate,* 142.
49 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 218.
50 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 218.
51 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 219.
52 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 219.

Similar dynamics appeared in the Southwest, where reproductive policy largely focused on limiting the fertility of Mexican American and Indigenous women. In Texas, Betty Mary Goetting founded the first birth control clinic along the U.S.-Mexico border, the Mothers' Health Center of El Paso, and framed contraception as a means of preventing children born to the "diseased" or "least fit," reducing "the tax burden of unwanted babies," and rescuing poor women "enslaved" by poverty and heredity.[53] Goetting linked family limitation to improving "racial fitness" and alleviating poverty among Mexican Americans.[54] While many Mexican and Indigenous women sought birth control because of economic hardship or health risks, they were often taken advantage of and misguided by eugenic logic.

By integrating birth control into public health programs while simultaneously promoting eugenic ideas about regulating the fertility of certain groups, namely Black women, Southern states embedded eugenics into their welfare systems. North Carolina created a formal Eugenics Board and expanded the authority of social workers and public health officials to petition for the sterilization of non-institutionalized individuals, a process that disproportionately targeted poor women and women of color.[55] Between 1929 and 1974, an estimated 7,600 people were sterilized under the North Carolina program, with all 100 counties participating.[56] Clarence Gamble, a doctor and prominent supporter of both birth control and eugenics and benefactor of North Carolina's program, praised sterilization as "a removal of bars against marriage" and "one of the greatest safeguards against promiscuity and unfaithfulness."[57] Ultimately, these state initiatives advanced the overlapping goals of the birth control and eugenics movements by systematically controlling the reproduction of the "unfit," especially women of color.

Birth Control and the New Deal

Between the years of 1939 and 1942, the birth control movement was incorporated unofficially into the health programming of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the rural United States. The FSA was originally formed to assist the "bottom third" of Americans and assist the 1.7 million farm families experiencing dislocation and poverty during the Depression.[58] One of the major initiatives of the FSA was the creation of government-established migrant labor camps which provided housing and social services especially for displaced

53 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 210.
54 Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 210.
55 Schoen, *The State and Women's Sexuality,* 20.
56 "About the Office of Justice for Sterilization Victims." NC DOA. Accessed April 5, 2026. https://www.doa.nc.gov/about/special-programs/office-justice-sterilization-victims/about.
57 Schoen, *The State and Women's Sexuality,* 41.
58 Melcher, *Pregnancy, Motherhood, and Choice,* 78.

white agricultural workers, or "Okies," who had migrated West. Beyond offering temporary shelter and mitigating the social and economic impacts of the Great Depression, these camps introduced rural health programs that provided nutrition, health education, sanitation services, immunizations, and prenatal, postnatal, and obstetric care.[59] In 1938, and in partnership with the BCFA, the FSA quietly began a program to supply contraceptives to migrant women.[60] By March 1939, approximately 350 FSA county workers had been equipped to distribute contraceptives as part of this effort.[61] Public health nurses and FSA agents responsible for identifying women to receive contraceptive advice were instructed to evaluate family histories for signs of "insanity," "feeblemindedness," or epilepsy, as well as to look for the presence of diseases such as syphilis, gonorrhea, and tuberculosis. They were also directed to consider whether a woman's physical condition might improve through family limitation.[62]

W.C. Morehead, an FSA employee, said in 1940 that "The U.S. Government has never endorsed birth control service; which means that this whole program in FSA is semiofficial, since the President, Congress, and Public Health Services have no official cognizance of the fact that a government bureau is promoting this service."[63] Despite the "semiofficial" nature of the program, the systematic distribution of birth control to white migrant women, combined with the denial of access and recommendations for women of color, suggests that the United States government played a role in the promotion of eugenic ideals through the FSA birth control program.

Mildred Delp, an FSA nurse, played a significant role in bringing birth control to migrant women. After meeting Margaret Sanger in 1939 when she visited the Indio camp, Delp was hired by the BCFA and began collaborating with other FSA nurses and doctors to educate women in need.[64] She traveled more than 1,800 miles per month in the three years she worked for the BCFA and FDA, speaking to women about spermicide foam and baby spacing.[65] Many women were desperate for birth control services, and relied on Delp for fertility control. One woman wrote to her saying "Dear Mildred: I'm in a fix. My little boy pried the bottom out of my can of powder. There's only enough left for one

---

59 Melcher, *Pregnancy, Motherhood, and Choice,* 81.

60 Melcher, *Pregnancy, Motherhood, and Choice,* 77.

61 Brenda J. Taylor, "The Farm Security Administration and Rural Families in the South" in *The New Deal and Beyond: Social Welfare in the South Since 1930,* ed. Elna c. Green, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 40.

62 Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 38.

63 Kelly R. O'Reilly "A 'Semiofficial' Program: New Deal Politics and the Discourse of Birth Control in California, 1939–1942." *Journal of Policy History* 30, no. 1 (2018): 62–82. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898030617000380.

64 Melcher, *Pregnancy, Motherhood, and Choice,* 78.

65 Melcher, *Pregnancy, Motherhood, and Choice,* 81.

more use. I think it is wonderful. My last period was July 30th, and my next one depends on you. Urgent."[66] In her personal journal, Delp documented her meetings with impoverished women, often shocked at their living conditions. She wrote once, "Tis a sobering experience to find a youngish mother in a bed in a 16x14 metal cabin, with two babies cuddled close to her, one 10 days old, the next 15 months, with three other small kiddies hovering over a little tin stove to dry out from the downpour."[67] The lack of information about birth control services, alongside opposition from husbands, who objected to the use of contraceptives and even poked holes in diaphragms, contributed to the high childbirth rates of poor women.[68]

A group of women in LaForge, Missouri, listen to a speech by a public health official of the FSA. (1938)[69]

Migrant camps primarily served poor white Americans, who were seen as capable of "rehabilitation." Mexican, Filipino, and Black women were rarely allowed access to FSA birth control services, but FSA nurses still provided

66 Melcher, *Pregnancy, Motherhood, and Choice,* 81.
67 Melcher, *Pregnancy, Motherhood, and Choice,* 86.
68 Schoen, "The State and Women's Sexuality," 43.
69 Russell Lee, photographer, *Wives of FSA Farm Security Administration Negro clients listening to speech by visiting public health official, Southeast Missouri Farms. La Forge, Missouri.* United States New Madrid County La Forge Missouri, 1938, Aug. Photograph, https://www.loc.gov/item/2017737157/.

education and contraception to women of color in many cases. In 1941, Delp wrote “We had one Mexican mother, 3 Negroes, and 13 white women–all interested [in birth control] and articulate.”[70] The FSA’s integration of birth control in the later years of the Depression demonstrated an expansion of reproductive services for white women and a reinforcement of racial hierarchy and eugenic thought for women of color. Although there is limited documentation of the FSA-BCFA program, the connection of the BCFA to eugenic ideology, the FSA’s racialized programming, and the pattern of state programs recommending different birth control methods to women of color suggest that nonwhite women may have faced pressure toward sterilization or unsafe contraception methods due to their race at the hands of a New Deal agency.

The Negro Project

In 1939, Margaret Sanger and the BCFA, with the cooperation of state public health officials, designed the Negro Project–an initiative designed to control Black fertility in the South.[71] Although the project was framed as a response to high rates of poverty and maternal mortality, which could be solved through birth-rate reduction, the proposal and personal correspondence between leaders of the project suggest otherwise. The plan was urgent, asserting that “The mass of Negroes, particularly in the South, still breed carelessly and disastrously. With the result that the increase among Negroes, even more among whites, is from that portion of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear children properly.”[72] The proposal also recommended strategically enlisting Black ministers and physicians to ensure compliance and foster trust among Black populations. Clarence Gamble, the project’s primary author, wrote in a memo, “There is great danger that we will fail because the Negroes will think it a plan for extermination. Hence let’s appear to let the colored run it.”[73] Sanger echoed these sentiments in a now infamous letter to Gamble, saying “We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members.”[74]

Sanger also used the project to test contraceptive jellies and foam powders to determine if they could be effectively used without a diaphragm, which would have the potential to provide cheaper and simpler birth control

70 Melcher, *Pregnancy, Motherhood, and Choice*, 82.

71 Joyce C. Follett, “The Negro Project.” Making Democracy Real, 2019. https://sites.smith.edu/making-democracy-real/the-negro-project/.

72 Follet, “The Negro Project.”

73 Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 235.

74 Margaret Sanger, Letter to Clarence Gamble, Milton, MA: 255 Adams St, December 10, 1939, accessible at https://sites.smith.edu/making-democracy-real/the-negro-project/

methods for women.[75] This meant that Black women in the South became unknowing test subjects for experimental contraceptive methods that would ultimately benefit other women. To assess the reception of the program, Sanger hired a lobbyist, who reported that "Religious superstition and absolute ignorance on the subject among the Negro people was recognized as the most difficult handicap [to the program]," which informed the project design, and reflected the paternalistic attitudes birth control reformers had about Black women.[76]

While Sanger claimed that contraception would provide autonomy to white women, she framed it as a mechanism of social control and coercion for Black women. Angela Davis even argued in her 1983 novel *Women, Race, and Class* that the Negro Project "confirmed the ideological victory of the racism associated with eugenic ideas."[77] Ultimately, despite public support for the program, none of the Black birth control clinics became permanent; however, the project's legacy provides a disarming case study of the eugenic foundations of Depression era birth control initiatives.

After the Depression

The American birth control movement developed alongside the rise of eugenic thought and public health reform, and while it was often framed as a means of expanding women's autonomy, it became deeply intertwined with policies that reinforced racial and class hierarchies. Throughout the Depression era, poor women and women of color in particular were often framed as "unfit" individuals whose fertility needed to be controlled for the sake of economic stability and "racial betterment." Eugenic notions were widely accepted in American society, and birth controllers believed that aligning their movement with accepted science of the time would bring legitimacy to their cause. While this served them well in some instances, the rise of the Nazi party, and entrance of the United States into World War II forced reproductive activists to reconsider the eugenic foundations of their movement.

German racial hygienists worked to emulate American immigration restrictions and sterilization initiatives in Nazi policy, and figures like Paul Popenoe of the Human Betterment Foundation "viewed the German sterilization law as the fulfillment of principles developed by the California movement."[78] As Nazi policies became synonymous with totalitarianism and mass unemployment, American birth control advocates worked to distance themselves from their

---

75 Follet, The Negro Project.
76 Follet, The Negro Project.
77 Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class,* (New York: Random House, 1981).
78 Paul Popenoe, "The German Sterilization Law." *Journal of Heredity* 25, no. 7 (1934): 257–60. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jhered.a103937.

earlier partnership.[79] After the war, and with new support for birth control from states, advocates began to concern themselves more with family planning rather than population control.

However, even as the movement shifted away from eugenic language, it continued to target and coerce marginalized women to advance its goals. In the 1950s, scientists John Rock and Gregory Pincus researched new hormonal contraception options, testing initial renderings of the oral birth control pill on psychiatric patients at the Worcester State Hospital, despite the fact that many of them were infertile and would not benefit from the study.[80] After realizing that they needed a larger sample size to ensure efficacy of their product, they began clinical trials on women in Puerto Rico. Although many women were eager to participate in the trials, likely due to the fact that sterilization was the only method of birth control available on the island at the time, they were not provided with full information about risks or side effects of the drug.[81] 17% of participants complained of nausea, headaches, and dizziness, and Dr. Edris Rice-Wray, medical director of the Puerto Rico Family Planning Association, who worked with Rock and Pincus conducting experiments, concluded that the 10-milligram pill caused “too many side reactions to be acceptable.”[82] Ultimately, On May 9, 1960, the FDA announced provisional approval of the oral contraceptive pill, and the ability of American women to experience reproductive autonomy was expanded immensely.[83] Due to the unethical testing methods performed on and sacrifices made by Puerto Rican women in the 1950s, the pill now is the second most widely used contraceptive among women ages 15-49, second only to female sterilization.[84]

The history of the birth control movement offers a powerful case study in broader conversations about racism in healthcare and government overreach. The Great Depression created a unique opportunity for birth control advocates to advance their agenda by aligning themselves with proponents of scientific racism and population control, which helped secure autonomy for some women, but enabled the reproductive persecution of others. Contraception is one of the most important developments in women’s history, but the eugenic foundations of early birth control advocacy and the role of state and federal governments in controlling the fertility of marginalized populations cannot be understated.

---

79 May, *America and the Pill*, 20.

80 May, *America and the Pill,* 25.

81 May, *America and the Pill,* 26.

82 May, *America and the Pill,* 29.

83 May, *America and the Pill,* 30.

84 Kimberly Daniels and Joyce C. Abma, “Current Contraceptive Status Among Women Aged 15–49: United States, 2017–2019.” *NCHS Data Brief*, no 388. (2020). https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db388-H.pdf https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db388-H.pdf

Riley Allen is a graduating senior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, majoring in American History and Public Policy with a minor in Education. At UNC, she has conducted research through the Department of History and worked as a policy research associate studying racially disproportionate discipline in early childhood settings. She also serves as a Student Advocate with the UNC Office of Student Legal Counsel and is a longtime tutor with Read and Feed, supporting multilingual elementary students’ literacy and advancing educational equity in the Triangle.

White Containment and the Double Victory Campaign in World War II

Helen Dehnert
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

Abstract: This paper examines the Double Victory (Double V) Campaign of 1942 as a transformative yet constrained form of African American resistance during World War II. While existing scholarship often isolates the Black experience of the movement, this study also analyzes the campaign through the lens of white counter-resistance and strategies of containment. Utilizing a primary source analysis of both Black and mainstream white newspapers across Northern and Southern states, the research explores how federal authorities and the white press suppressed the movement's reach. Findings indicate that while the campaign successfully mobilized the Black community through grassroots initiatives and patriotic rhetoric, it was effectively neutralized by the dominant white power structure through editorial omission, surveillance, and narratives of subversion. Despite this, the campaign's legacy remains significant for cementing a collective internal identity and laying out the rhetorical groundwork for the post-war Civil Rights Movement.

Introduction

World War II was fought under the auspices of democracy, framed by President Roosevelt as a battle to secure the "Four Freedoms": freedom of speech, freedom to worship in one's own way, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. These democratic ideals were used to inspire and rally white support for the war nationwide. However, the bitter irony of this rhetoric was not lost on Black Americans. The ideals Roosevelt preached collided daily with the harsh, systemic reality of Jim Crow segregation at home. Many Black people perceived World War II as the "White Man's War," arguing that "white folks would rather lose the war than give up the luxury of race prejudice."[1] The United States military was still segregated, and despite making up a large portion of the population, Black people were not allowed to serve in combat roles. This, many Black Americans argued, was the attitude of a nation who cared more about appeasing white racial prejudices than winning the war.

1 Matthew Delmont, *Half American : The Heroic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad* (Penguin Books, 2022), 97.

In January of 1942, James Thompson, a twenty-six-year-old cafeteria worker from Kansas, sent a letter to the nation's largest black newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*. His letter, which was printed by the *Courier*, contained the following:

> Being an American of dark complexion... these questions flash through my mind: ... "Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life?" "Is the kind of America I know worth defending?" "Will America be a true and pure democracy after this war?" "Will colored Americans suffer still the indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past?" I suggest that while we keep defense and victory in the forefront that we don't lose sight of our fight for true democracy at home. The V for victory sign is being displayed prominently in all socalled democratic countries which are fighting for victory over aggression, slavery and tyranny. If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict, then let we colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory. *The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within.* For surely those who perpetuate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis forces.[2]

His words would go on to circulate in Black newspapers nationwide, capturing Black national attention and acting as the basis for what would later become a powerful resistance movement known as the "Double Victory" (Double V) Campaign.

The Double Victory Campaign of 1942 transformed Black patriotism into a powerful form of resistance against both global fascism and domestic segregation. Emerging during a period of low Black morale toward America's participation in World War II, the Double V movement evolved into a patriotic initiative that directly confronted white power structures and challenged prevailing perceptions of Black citizenship and loyalty. In turn, white authorities sought to contain the movement and undermine its reach, restricting its influence within mainstream society and framing it through narratives of racial unrest and alleged subversion. Ultimately, the campaign's legacy lies in proving that Black patriotism could successfully mobilize internal community and challenge prevailing perceptions of Black citizenship. However, it could not, by itself, compel a systemic change from the dominant white power structure committed to its own ideological priorities.

Resistance in the Context of the Double V Campaign

2 James Thompson, "Should I Sacrifice My Life to Live Half-American?," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 31, 1942. 3.

The Double V Campaign has been acknowledged by historians as an expression of African American agency during World War II, but the full scope of its evolution and the limitations imposed by external white power structures remain underexplored. The existing literature largely focuses on either African American military tradition as a continuous struggle for rights or the broader histories of racial conditions during the war. Scholarship rarely delves into the Double V Campaign on a sustained level, viewing it as a high-energy but ultimately short-lived campaign that failed to produce any concrete legislative changes. However, when viewed through the lens of symbolic resistance, the Campaign reveals itself not as a failure of policy but as a victory of rhetoric that cemented a unified collective identity amongst Black Americans and laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement.

The Double V by Rawn James Jr. highlights the vital place of African American military tradition in American history. This scholarship argues that Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the United States military, was the "culmination of more than 150 years of legal, political, and moral struggle."[3] Beginning with African Americans' service in the Revolutionary War, the text explores the decades of labor and protest it took to overcome the deep-seated racism present in the United States military. The Double V Campaign itself is touched upon briefly, mentioning its origins and whom it mobilized. However, any discussion of white resistance to the campaign is notably absent. Similarly, *Double Victory* by Ronald Takaki discusses the history of the United States in World War II as "told through the lives of an ethnically diverse group of ordinary Americans struggling for equality at home and fighting for freedom overseas."[4] Takaki explores the war through the perspectives of many different Americans: A Black man, a Mexican-American woman, a Jewish-American soldier,but no mention of white resistance.

Other scholarships mention the Double V Campaign, such as *Forum for Protest* by Lee Finkle and *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in WWII* by Nat Brandt. However, in both studies, the campaign is not granted the analytical weight of a central topic and instead occupies only a miniscule portion of their broader narratives, indicating that the scholarship only uses the Double V as an illustrative example of wartime dissent rather than a sustained, evolving resistance movement.

Existing scholarship around the Double V Campaign tends to isolate the African American experience of resistance if discussing it at all, often overlooking the critical role of white counter-resistance as a limiting force that

3 James Rawn, *The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America's Military* (Bloomberg Press, 2014), 1.

4 Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Little, Brown and Company, 2001).

determined the movement's scope and potential. This analytical deficiency is compounded by a lack of research solely focused on the campaign itself, which ignores two crucial dynamics. First, scholarship neglects how the white-controlled culture actively prevented the Double V's core message from penetrating mainstream society. Second, it fails to analyze the rhetorical evolution of the Campaign as a strategic response to the narrow limits placed upon them by white society.

Furthermore, examining the study of the Double V Campaign through the lens of resistance yields new insights on both the dynamics of the campaign and the idea of resistance in itself. Resistance is not always about overt confrontation aimed at defeating the oppressor through force. It can instead be a strategic effort to mobilize community and force the oppressor to change their ways by exposing the inherent hypocrisy of their ideals. As argued in James C. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), subordinate groups can resist domination not through overt rebellion, but rather through more subtle, daily actions.[5] The Double V was a form of resistance based on civic loyalty and patriotism, which inherently relied on making the white power structure feel guilty about its failure to extend democracy to its own Black citizens. However, this moral strategy faced immediate limitations, as counter-resistance was swiftly deployed to neutralize the campaign's political efficacy.

The central dilemma of the Double V's resistance strategy is clear: a resistance based on civilly encouraging an oppressor to change its ways provides the opponent with the power to ignore or strategically frame the resistance however they so choose. The white press, by burying the Double V's message, simply refused to engage with it, thus effectively containing the movement to and restricting its influence on the segregated Black community.

Origins of the Double V Campaign

James Thompson's letter to *The Pittsburgh Courier* in January of 1942 became so popular that the *Courier* decided to mold the Double V into an official campaign. On February 7, 1942, the *Courier* officially launched the Double V Campaign in their newspaper, complete with a Double V symbol. The goal of the campaign as originally described in the *Courier* was to win the war against both external and internal enemies. As Edward T. Rouzeau, editor and manager of the *Courier*'s New York office put it, "Black America must fight two wars and win both."[6] One week later, after an overwhelmingly positive response from Black Americans, the *Courier* further elaborated on the goal of the Double V Campaign, writing "thus in our fight for freedom we wage a two-pronged attack

5 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1987).
6 *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 7, 1942, 5.

against our enslavers at home and those abroad that would enslave us. WE HAVE A STAKE IN THIS FIGHT…"[7]

The ideals behind the Double V were not new; they resonated with older patterns of Black resistance. P.L. Prattis, Executive Editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, explained the Double V as a continuum of Black disillusionment after World War I, writing in a letter: "'What are we fighting for?' the American people asked in 1917. 'To make the world safe for democracy,' the statesmen answered after much computation and reflection. But we didn't… must it all again be in vain?'"[8] Black Americans wanted to ensure that this war would produce a different outcome for them and thus launched the Double V Campaign.

The national message of the Double V Campaign remained largely unacknowledged by the broader white American public, yet flourished within the African American community, as evidenced by the thousands of letters of support the *Pittsburgh Courier* received. The newspaper began publishing these letters with commendatory titles such as "Detroit is Impressed," "Double V is Tops," and "Double Victory Wins."[9] The letters the *Courier* received revealed a wide emotional spectrum within the African American community. Responses ranged from bitter condemnation of systemic prejudice to expressions of enthusiasm for the Campaign's vision. One letter wrote, "If and when the American White Man loses this war, I am wondering if he will think why he did not give the colored man a chance with the white in the Navy?", while another more positively remarked "Congratulations to the 'Double V' campaign. I have got up a group of fifty men to carve marks and write the 'Double V' emblem on everything that is movable and immovable here in S.C."[10] On March 7th, two months after Thompson's letter, the *Courier* ran 345 ¼ inches of Double V material (8 percent of the available news space), and on April 11 climbed to 13 percent.[11] The movement also began to expand to other large Black publications around the nation, including the *Chicago Defender* and *Atlanta Daily World*. Within months, the Double V Campaign had managed to cement itself as a cornerstone of Black thought surrounding black involvement in World War II.

The Campaign's original militant rhetoric likely generated significant apprehension amongst white Americans, who interpreted the demand for

---

7 *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 14, 1942, 1.

8 "Editorial Releases from Black Newspapers," In *Claude A. Barnett Papers: The Associated Negro Press, 1918-1967, Part 2: Associated Negro Press Organizational Files, 1920-1966; Black Press*.

9 *Pittsburgh Courier,* March 7, 1942, 12.

10 Patrick Washburn, "The 'Pittsburgh Courier's' Double V Campaign in 1942" (1986), 76.

11 Patrick Washburn, *A Question of Sedition: The Federal Government's Investigation of the Black Press During World War II* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 100.

"victory within" as a genuine threat that trained, Black soldiers would use their military skills to violently challenge domestic racial hierarchies. This underlying anxiety directly contributed to the refusal by federal authorities to fully integrate the armed forces, even as maintaining racial segregation visibly hindered the United States' overall war efficiency and manpower potential. In early March, *Courier* columnist Frank E. Bolden toughened his stance on the ideals behind the Double V Campaign, writing:

> THOSE WHO DO NOT WANT COLORED PEOPLE TO FULLY PARTICIPATE IN THE WAR EFFORT SHOULD BE CLASSED AS TRAITORS TO THE CAUSE OF DEMOCRACY, BECAUSE THEY ARE BLOCKING THE ASSISTANCE OF A POWERFUL ALLY THAT HAS NEVER SHOWN A SHORTAGE OF COURAGE AND SACRIFICE - COLORED AMERICANS![12]

Bolden stressed that the *Courier* would continue to advocate for the Double V Campaign and its goals until they were accomplished. However, on March 21, immediately following Bolden's column, the *Courier* subdued the Campaign's militant rhetoric, choosing instead to assume a clear public stance that emphasized national loyalty and patriotic legitimacy. The editors of the *Courier* wrote that "'The 'Double V' combines... the aims and ideals of all men, black as well as white, to make this a more perfect union of peace-loving men and women, living in complete harmony and equality."[13] The editors emphasized the loyalty of Black Americans, and a few weeks later published the front page of the *Courier* with the "Double V Creed" in bold letters, reaffirming Black Americans allegiance to the United States.[14] While the precise catalyst for the rhetorical change remains ambiguous—though likely rooted in an effort to safeguard white racial anxieties—the intent was clear. The *Courier* aimed to publicize the Double V Campaign while simultaneously convincing apprehensive white audiences that the movement was not a call for racial disloyalty or violence. This evolution, which made the Campaign more digestible to white America, serves as concrete evidence that white control over mainstream media and culture was a definitive limiting force that ultimately determined the scope and potential of the Double V Campaign.

Mobilizing a Movement

The Double V Campaign took off in many ways, popularizing itself through its ease of integration into everyday activities, popular culture, religious institutions, and women's participation. Black Americans' Double V efforts, which were cloaked in patriotism, centered around proving to whites that they

12 Washburn, "The 'Pittsburgh Courier's' Double V Campaign in 1942," 77.
13 *Pittsburgh Courier,* March 21, 1942, 12.
14 Washburn, "The 'Pittsburgh Courier's' Double V Campaign in 1942," 74-77.

were “good Americans.” This approach granted white perception a decisive role in evaluating the Campaign’s legitimacy, creating a limiting force that shaped the Campaign’s ultimate scope and restricted its potential reach to white audiences. Despite this, the grassroots efforts devoted to the Double V movement helped cement a community among Black Americans that laid a foundation for the future Civil Rights Movement.

The Double V campaign gained substantial momentum through citizen-led initiatives. The *Pittsburgh Courier* encouraged readers to form Double V Clubs as early as April 1942, and by mid-1942, VV clubs were everywhere, from California to Connecticut and from Michigan to Texas.[15] These clubs promoted the Double V Campaign, holding “Double V for Victory” dances, flag-raising ceremonies, pageants, and even baseball games between Black teams.[16] In Franklin, Pennsylvania, white newspapers noted Double V teas, club meetings, and social events[17], and in Michigan, the Flint Journal and Kalamazoo Gazette reported Double V “parties,” “send-offs,” and “bridge events.”[18] These events were popular because they allowed for routine gatherings that doubled as quiet sites of organization and morale-building. Black Americans were able to cement a community supporting the Double V within the limitations of what white America deemed as acceptable.

Alongside social events, Double V clubs also engaged in small acts of citizenship and advocacy. They wrote to Congress protesting poll taxes, lobbied for nondiscriminatory hiring, and sent care packages to servicemen.[19] However, they mostly functioned to garner African American support for the war and to reflect Black commitment to the war effort, giving the government no real reason to intervene. Double V clubs encouraged Black Americans to buy war bonds, and they did so in droves, funding the purchase of new military equipment and emphasizing their patriotism and enthusiasm for the war effort.[20] Double V buttons and symbols also spread throughout the nation. Newspapers sold Double V pins and promoted the campaign through visible symbols like war bonds and slogans.[21] The diffusion of the Double V symbol into society represents a subtle but pervasive act of mobilization by Black Americans, whereby they found ways to resist by leveraging the few political and cultural spaces permitted to them by the prevailing white power structure.

Integration into popular culture also leveraged the Double V

15 Washburn, “The ‘Pittsburgh Courier’s’ Double V Campaign in 1942.”
16 *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 1, 1942, 15.
17 *The News-Herald*, August 6, 1942, 11.
18 *The Flint Journal*, January 21, 1943, 2.
19 Washburn, “The ‘Pittsburgh Courier’s’ Double V Campaign in 1942,” 74.
20 “V for Victory.”
21 “V for Victory.”; Washburn, “The ‘Pittsburgh Courier’s’ Double V Campaign in 1942,” 76.

Campaign's popularity and aided in cementing a community amongst Black Americans. Langston Hughes, a popular Black poet and lyricist from the era, used his art to bring attention to the Double V movement. His song "Freedom Road," which was written with the Campaign's goals in mind, used patriotic imagery such as "United we stand, divided we fall," while still demanding racial unity and equality.[22] Other songs like "Yankee Doodle Tan" by Andy Razaf and J.C. Johnson helped popularize the Double V message through jazz and entertainment channels.[23] A Double V song was also printed in the *Courier*, reading:

Hail to the Colored American

Watch the light of his glory shine,

Hail to the freedom-loving man

Marching in the line!

Let us help to win the fight,

Standing firmly in the right,

UNDER THE "DOUBLE V"

Drive on to Victory!

Stars and Stripes wave for us too

Long may it wave–red, white and blue;

Rid the world of treachery,

Break the bonds of tyranny

UNDER THE "DOUBLE V"

Drive on to Victory![24]

The voices of popular culture icons singing and writing about the Double V ideals added class and credibility to the Campaign. Art embedded resistance within Black popular culture, allowing African Americans to publicly assert their Double V ideals while strategically minimizing the appearance of radical dissent by cloaking their art in patriotism.

Religious institutions also played a role in legitimizing the Double V Campaign. In March of 1942, the National Negro Baptist Council designated

22 University of Delaware, *The Ephemeral Langston Hughes* (University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press).

23 "V for Victory."

24 *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 4, 1942, 15.

Easter Sunday as "National Negro Double Victory Day."[25] It encouraged Black pastors to integrate the messages of the Campaign into their sermons and to call for justice, enfranchisement, equal educational opportunities and salaries, and more.[26] Doing so mobilized African Americans within their own communities and avoided directly confronting white racism. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported on the National Negro Double Victory Day a week later, printing a large image of Jesus emerging from a cloud holding a V in each hand titled "He Shall Come in Victory."[27] The cutline read: "This is a 'Double V' scene. Its importance and significance in the current struggle cannot be disassociated from its spiritual implications as expressed in Revelations."[28] The Easter Sunday publicity campaign "merged Christian celebration with civil rights interests," and once again allowed Black Americans to articulate resistance while remaining within the strict boundaries imposed upon them by white social order; They were careful to ensure that their activism took place in areas perceived as non-threatening by the white establishment, such as churches and social clubs.[29]

Finally, women's participation in the Double V Campaign popularized the movement across gendered dimensions. Women were able to use their socially sanctioned spaces as sites of gendered resistance, representing an intersection between gender and racial equity. Although not technically excluded from the mainstream Double V clubs, Black women formed their own Double V clubs which included more "ladylike" activities. *The News-Herald* (Franklin, PA) reported on the Women's Double V Club holding teas, pageants, and social gatherings that also explained the campaign's meaning and aims.[30] Although seemingly apolitical, activities such as these served as public affirmation of Black pride and patriotism under the Double V banner. The Double V also integrated into the women's style industry, popularizing the campaign. The *Courier* published images of Double V hats, "V for Victory" dresses, and "doubler" Double V hairstyles.[31] In this way, women blended domestic and civil roles by using their traditional "feminine" activities as a means of spreading the ideals of the Double V Campaign. However, women also resisted in more tangible ways. The Double Victory Girls Club of Cincinnati, Ohio, led a protest against racist hiring practices outside of a federal government building in December of 1943. They claimed that Black applicants were not considered for roles outside of being maids or maintenance workers, regardless of their background or experi-

25 Washburn, "The 'Pittsburgh Courier's' Double V Campaign in 1942," 78.
26 Washburn, "The 'Pittsburgh Courier's' Double V Campaign in 1942," 78.
27 *Pittsburgh Courier,* March 28, 1942, 15.
28 *Pittsburgh Courier,* March 28, 1942, 15.
29 Noelle Trent, "Easter 1942: a Reflection on The Double Victory Campaign." *AAIHS*, April 5, 2015.
30 *The News-Herald*, August 6, 1942, 11.
31 Washburn, "The 'Pittsburgh Courier's' Double V Campaign in 1942," 79.

ence.[32] Although the protest exposed the racial hypocrisy of the federal government, this local action, like many others, failed in altering the fundamentally segregationist policies governing employment in the immediate term, revealing the limits of a moralizing resistance strategy.

All the effort devoted to the Double V Campaign successfully cemented a strong sense of community amongst Black Americans, but it had minimal effect on immediately dismantling racist practices or laws. The Campaign operated within the constraining limits set by white society, necessitating an evolution in its rhetoric: the focus shifted away from the simultaneous achievement of two victories toward emphasizing victory abroad (the first V) to challenge white American hypocrisy. In making this tactical shift, Black Americans demanded inclusion in the war effort yet continued to concede to white authorities the power to define what constituted a "good American," ultimately limiting the campaign's scope and agency.

Federal and FBI Response to the Double V Campaign

In the midst of WWII, federal leaders framed racial equality as a threat to wartime unity. The Roosevelt administration refused to integrate the armed forces, stating that "the policy of the War Department is not to intermingle colored and white enlisted personnel… [or] to make changes would produce situations destructive to morale."[33] Presidential adviser Johnathan Daniels dismissed Double V's demands as "extortion," arguing that its call for "two victories or none" showed Black Americans conditional loyalty rather than patriotism.[34] Maintaining segregation was presented as essential to discipline and national security, and the ideals propelling Double V Campaign threatened this. Thus, to undermine and contain the Campaign's reach, the federal government strategically framed it through the lens of alleged sedition.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover viewed the campaign as "seditious" and dangerous for morale.[35] He ordered the gathering of information about the Black community to see if they were influenced by any "unamerican ideologies" in what would eventually be known as the *Survey of Racial Conditions in the United States* (RACON).[36] This 714-page investigation mentioned the Double V Campaign numerous times, with one division describing the Campaign as

32 Cheryl Mullenbach, *Double victory: How African American women broke race and gender barriers to help win World War II* (Chicago Review Press, 2017), 45-47.

33 Zoë Scott-Goss, "'Should I Sacrifice to Live Half-American?': An Examination of the Double V Campaign" (MA thesis, Claremont Graduate University, 2023), 21.

34 Zoë Scott-Goss, "'Should I Sacrifice to Live Half-American,'" 33.

35 Zoë Scott-Goss, "'Should I Sacrifice to Live Half-American,'" 34.

36 Zoë Scott-Goss, "'Should I Sacrifice to Live Half-American,'" 34.

"Victory at Home First and The Victory Abroad."[37] Hoover institutionalized racial surveillance as a key part of the state's counter-resistance strategy of containment.

The Justice Department and Office of War Information (OWI) also attempted to "tone down" Black rhetoric surrounding the war, which they believed threatened wartime unity. "The war had to be won, and anything that made that goal more difficult could not be tolerated. Blacks and the black press were expected to abandon their demands..."[38] The federal government's concern became clear in the spring of 1942 when officials from the US Office of Facts and Figures met with Black leaders to discuss how to improve black morale. Editors from major Black newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Baltimore Afro-American* were present, among others. These leaders unanimously agreed it would be nearly impossible to increase black morale unless the government ended some of its discriminatory practices, and the meeting ended with newspaper refusing to concede to requests for reduced[39] However, some newspapers did proceed more cautiously in the following months, with the *Crisis* assuring the government that Black grievances were not intended to signal "either you give us what you want or we won't support the war."[40] The federal government was able to successfully enact a strategy of containment by frightening the Black press into tempering its rhetoric, ultimately restricting the Double V's influence within mainstream society.

Despite meetings such as those with the Office of War Information, the Black press, particularly the *Pittsburgh Courier*, remained under far more extensive federal surveillance than the Black community realized. Notes indicate that FBI and military intelligence memos described prominent Black newspapers (the *Courier*, *Defender*, etc.) as potential threats to national morale and even referred to the Double V Campaign as an "aggressive Negro organization."[41] Another FBI special report memo dating back to March of 1942 claimed the Double V Campaign was being "rapidly interpreted to its limit" and that it was "only luck, and nothing else, that there have been no deaths to date."[42] The memos accused Black editors of stirring racial dissatisfaction, and drew up strategies for containing their rhetoric. One memo suggested that the FBI

---

37 Zoë Scott-Goss, "'Should I Sacrifice to Live Half-American,'" 34.
38 Washburn, *A Question of Sedition*, 101.
39 Washburn, *A Question of Sedition*, 101.
40 Washburn, *A Question of Sedition*, 102.
41 OF 4245g Office of Production Management, Committee on Fair Employment Practices, Agriculture Department, 1943. MS, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Race Relations, 1933-1945. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. *Archives Unbound* (accessed March 30, 2026). https://link-gale-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/apps/doc/SC5110967163/GDSC?u=unc_main&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=c5ccca2e&pg=1.
42 OF 4245 G Office of Production Management, 1943.

should "put pressure on the Negro press by getting prominent Negros to write to Roosevelt and to the Justice Department that the Negro press was inflammatory, and that it was dividing the war effort; it was against the war effort."[43] Taken together, this extensive covert documentation proves that white authorities were actively enacting a strategy of containment by framing the Double V Campaign through narratives of alleged subversion and as a threat to national morale.

Accusations of "Axis propaganda" and "communist infiltration" also plagued the Double V Campaign. The Office of War Information's Special Services Division compiled a report titled "Is the Negro Press Pro-Axis?"[44] While the OWI admitted it was "not difficult" to classify the Black press as potentially subversive due to its strong opposition to wartime discrimination, the agency nevertheless identified multiple crucial distinctions separating these publications from genuine fascist publications.[45] Key differences included stances on civil liberties, sources of funding, and established longevity. In the end, OWI concluded that despite its best efforts to find them so, the Black Press was not seditious and should not be treated as such. Their findings provide a nuanced perspective on the white strategy of containment: the federal government had to be tactical in how they chose to contain the Double V Campaign. Had they arrested a publisher for sedition, the story would have likely made national news, broadcasting Double V ideals into mainstream society. To avoid this publicity for the Double V Campaign yet still contain it further, the government instead leaned into strategies of surveillance and political pressure rather than that of legal battles.

However, the government did not have to formally designate the Black press and the Double V Campaign as subversive, as the general white public willingly did so for them. Black lyricists like Langston Hughes and singer John White received intense attacks over their performance of "Freedom Road," a song based on the ideals of the Double V campaign.[46] The two men were accused of being communists and "anti-America" at a time in which public sentiment viewed communism as an existential threat to the American way of life.[47] Such labeling reveals how rhetoric opposing the Double V veered into branding racial critique as ideological dissent, stemming from the white belief that any challenge to Jim Crow was a subversive assault on the established American social and political order. Hughes remarked that his song "Freedom Road" had been the victim of censorship, serving as evidence of the white

43 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) File 100-55616: Section 1 (September 1922–March 1963), Federal Bureau of Investigation Library, *Federal Surveillance of African Americans, 1920–1984* Collection.

44 Washburn, *A Question of Sedition*, 105.

45 Washburn, *A Question of Sedition*, 105.

46 University of Delaware, *The Ephemeral Langston Hughes*.

47 University of Delaware, *The Ephemeral Langston Hughes*.

strategy of containment surrounding the Double V campaign.[48] The underlying logic was that critiquing Jim Crow aided the enemy, an idea that was not necessarily incorrect. German and Japanese propagandists reportedly had a "field day" over internal clashes between Blacks and whites.[49] German radio stations broadcasted that the war was deeply unpopular in America, and all Axis powers deeply stressed the race question in America, with Nazi propagandists describing the irony of "the fight between whites and Negroes in the country of equality."[50] Ultimately, the public framing of the Double V Campaign as "anti-American" demonstrates a calculated strategy of white containment which effectively used this narrative to restrict the Campaign's influence within the white cultural sphere.

The success of this bureaucratic surveillance and rhetoric-framing is contested. *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist Frank Bolden denied claims that federal pressures made an impact on what they published in the paper or the publicizing of the Double V Campaign, saying, "Hell, no, the government pressure didn't cause us to back off. We welcomed it. It helped sell more papers when we wrote about it."[51] Despite his claims, the Double V's coverage in the Black press declined steeply over time, a trend which could be attributed to the federal government's successful containment strategy.

White Mainstream Media Response to the Double V Campaign

Mainstream white media developed a strategy to contain the Double V Campaign's message, a necessity rooted in the Campaign's direct conflict with white America's own undeclared "Double Victory"—winning the war abroad while preserving domestic segregation. This containment was primarily executed through the press's calculated failure to report on the campaign, thereby isolating the movement within the Black community. White newspapers across the United States enacted this silence in varying ways: Northern papers typically demonstrated indifference, often burying the Double V in coverage if it was mentioned at all; this relative restraint likely reflected a more liberal political climate which favored subtle marginalization over the outright hostility of the South. Meanwhile, Southern papers met the campaign with either explicit animosity or total silence. In both regions, omission served as an effective means of containment.

Based on the available historical archive, the Double V received at least 395 mentions in Pennsylvania's main Black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*,

48 University of Delaware, *The Ephemeral Langston Hughes*.
49 Nat Brandt, *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in WWII* (Syracuse University Press, 1997), 150.
50 Brandt, *Harlem at War.*
51 Washburn, "The 'Pittsburgh Courier's' Double V Campaign in 1942," 81.

over the period 1941-1943.[52] In stark contrast, it is mentioned only ten times in all the white newspapers across Pennsylvania.[53] Given the known gaps in historical newspaper collections, the actual number of mentions in both presses is likely higher, though the vast difference in coverage remains statistically significant. Most of the white publications that did mention the Double V campaign did not explain the meaning behind it or framed it as a morale campaign rather than one fighting for equality.[54] Although rare, one publication, *The News-Herald* of Franklin, PA, surprisingly reported on the Double V and actually explained its message, writing that the Campaign's purpose was to "fight for complete victory at home and abroad," among other details.[55] Although Pennsylvania was arguably the birthplace of the Double V, white Pennsylvanian newspapers viewed it with an air of indifference. They did not completely ignore the Double V but seemed to deem it un-worthy of space in the news, thus containing its message from pervading into white spheres of life.

In Michigan, the site of many race clashes such as the race riots in Detroit, the Double V campaign was mentioned almost proportionately in Black and white newspapers – likely because the Campaign was journalistically tied to the coverage of the riots.[56] Despite Double V leaders best efforts to mediate the violence, they were still conflated with the unrest in news coverage, framing the Campaign through the negative connotation of racial volatility and alluding to the idea that coverage tying the Double V to the riots was more important than coverage concerning Black political rights. Although mentioned more frequently than in Pennsylvania, the Double V Campaign was still not described effectively; its message was once again marketed as a campaign to improve morale rather than to achieve racial equality. Similarly, in New York, a state heavy with NAACP activity, the Double V lacked clear messaging in white media. Some newspapers stated clear explanations of the Double V Campaign, such as the *Buffalo Courier*, which announced the launching of the Campaign (although this was notably quite a bit after it had launched.)[57] Others, like the *Buffalo News*, tied the Double V into messaging about the Detroit race riots and racial unrest, leaving a negative connotation of the Double V for readers.[58] Notably, coverage of the Double V was consistently marginalized within white news-

52 Search for "Double V" across Pennsylvania newspapers (1941–1944), conducted via Newspapers.com

53 Search for "Double V" across Pennsylvania newspapers (1941–1944), conducted via Newspapers.com

54 Search for "Double V" across Pennsylvania newspapers (1941–1944), conducted via Newspapers.com

55 *The News-Herald,* August 28, 1942, 2.

56 Search for "Double V" across Michigan newspapers (1941–1944), conducted via Newspapers.com

57 *Buffalo Courier Express,* May 11, 1942, 7.

58 *The Buffalo News,* June 21, 1943, 12.

paper coverage. It was never featured on the front page and typically appeared deep within the paper (often 5, 10, or 15 pages in) if at all. The only exception to this pattern of suppression occurred when the Campaign's issues were explicitly linked to articles concerning racial unrest or riots. This practice allowed Northern white publishers to contain the Campaign's message by selectively suppressing its visibility and judging it to be unworthy of prime newspaper real estate, thereby signaling its lack of significance to the mainstream reader.

Meanwhile, the Southern press took a slightly different approach to containing the Double V Campaign, meeting it with either outright hostility or explicit silence. In the state of Georgia, which boasted strong Black and white presses, the Double V was disproportionately talked about in Black newspapers. In areas like Macon, GA, if it was mentioned in white publications at all, it was placed in a separate section labeled "News for Colored People."[59] By strategically placing news about The Double V Campaign in specialized sections for colored people, the press sent a clear signal to white society that the movement was solely a concern of the Black community and thus restricted its scope to the sphere of Black discourse. The only time that the Double V Campaign received front-page placement in Georgia occurred when it was mentioned alongside events of racial violence, such as the Detroit race riots.[60]

In Alabama, a state defined by a rigid racial hierarchy, the pattern of suppressing the Double V Campaign was consistent with the broader Southern strategy yet manifested with explicit hostility. Alabama newspapers were typically silent concerning the Double V Campaign except for a few mentions along with news about the Detroit race riots. Moving beyond simple omission, one publication, the *Birmingham Post*, explicitly framed the campaign as ideological treason, writing: "There is no Double-V. All who think so or try to work it that way are working a Double-X instead…double-crossing their country."[61] Thus, through both editorial silence and active hostility, the white press in Alabama successfully contained the Double V's message by framing it through narratives of social unrest and alleged subversion.

Perhaps the most explicit attacks on the Double V Campaign came from white Virginia publications. Virginius Dabney, editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, argued that "The Double V Campaign is a war against our enemies and against whites at home," radicalizing the movement and its message.[62] On April 26, 1942 the *Times-Dispatch* reported that, "the small minority of Negroes who make such a revolution the price of enthusiastic co-operation in their country's fight for survival are their own and their race's worst

59 *Macon Telegraph*, March 1, 1943, 2.
60 *The Columbus Ledger,* June 21, 1943, 1.
61 *Birmingham Post,* October 31, 1942, 1.
62 Scott-Goss, "'Should I Sacrifice to Live Half-American?'", 33.

enemies."[63] These attacks and the rhetorical effort to frame Black demands as a "war against whites" represent the most overt strategy of containment, effectively redefining the patriotic campaign as a subversive internal threat.

The analysis of both Northern and Southern white newspapers confirms the strategies of containment used to undermine the Double V Campaign's reach. The most powerful tool of this counter-resistance was editorial omission. The mainstream press largely isolated the campaign by denying it visibility, thereby restricting its influence within the dominant white social and political sphere. This containment manifested differently by region, likely due to their differing political climates. The North leaned into indifference, burying the Campaign in coverage, accepting its patriotic framing while minimizing its demands. Conversely, the South used explicit hostility and silence to contain the message, framing it in a negative light if written about at all. Consequently, the Double V Campaign's evolved emphasis on Black patriotism served as a successful defense in the North, protecting it from being fully suppressed, but it proved to be insufficient in the South. Holistically, the systemic use of silence as a method of counter-resistance to the Campaign severely limited its reach. Thus, the central dilemma of the Double V's resistance strategy is clear: a resistance based on civilly encouraging an oppressor to change its ways simultaneously gives the opponent the power to ignore or strategically frame the resistance however they so choose.

Everyday White South Resistance: The White South's "Double V"

The ideals behind the Double V Campaign were fundamentally incompatible with the established racial hierarchy of the United States, particularly in the South. As Jason Morgan Ward, author of *Defending White Democracy* wrote, "defenders of segregation articulated their own vision of Double Victory. Championing white supremacy and demanding freedom from outside interference, southern conservatives deemed federal encroachment and black insurgency to be as dangerous as an Axis invasion. White southerners, like African Americans, had entered the war fighting on two fronts."[64] They wanted to both combat German aggression abroad and maintain segregation at home. This undeclared "White Double V" meant that their motivation for involvement in the war had little to do with a moral rationale of fighting a racist power. From their perspective, the Double V gave the war a moral and political rationale that it did not have, and fear spread that if segregation were to come to an end, Black citizens would take over skilled jobs and push white people out of the workforce that

63 *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 26, 1942, 5.

64 Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 53-57.

had favored them for so long.[65] "Are we fighting this war to destroy everything we inherited from our forefathers?" asked a Mississippi Delta planter.[66]

White Americans were not fighting for a new America: they were fighting to keep things as they had been for decades. Racial equality threatened Southerners' way of life, and they argued that the equality the Double V was advocating for "must and shall not be done," an attitude consistent with historian James Silver's idea of "The Closed Society."[67] In a closed society, an individual's role technically cannot change. White Southern sought to trap African Americans into their lesser roles in a white supremacist system, and thus, winning the war abroad was viewed as commensurate to maintaining a rigid racial hierarchy domestically in the South. This ideological conflict reveals that the Double V did not necessarily have to be contained in some areas of the South; a deep commitment to defending white supremacy effectively precluded the Campaign's acceptance, rendering its message isolated and unpopular before it could even gain public traction.

Conclusion

The Double Victory Campaign stands as a pivotal moment in American history, transforming the act of Black patriotism into a potent, if limited, form of resistance against both global fascism and domestic segregation. Emerging from the bitterness caused by America's ideological hypocrisy during World War II, the movement evolved into a patriotic initiative that directly challenged prevailing white perceptions of Black citizenship and loyalty, yet the necessity of maintaining this loyal image constrained its resistance strategy. The movement successfully mobilized many African Americans, but not to engage in actions that would directly confront white racism- such as strikes or marches- for fear of being cast as anti-American. This limited action was met by white counter-resistance; white Americans employed strategies of containment – ranging from FBI surveillance to editorial silence from the mainstream white press – to undermine the Campaign's national reach and restrict its influence. By synchronizing these strategies of containment white authorities maintained a systemic blockade that marginalized the Double V Campaign at every level of American society.

Although the outcome of the Double V failed to dismantle Jim Crow in the immediate term, its legacy lies in the cementing of a powerful internal sense of collective identity amongst African Americans. The campaign created a new framework for resistance within the limitations placed upon Black society aimed at forcing the nation to confront the hypocrisy inherent in fighting for

---

65 Ward, *Defending White Democracy.*

66 Ward, *Defending White Democracy.*

67 Ward, *Defending White Democracy.;* James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society (*University Press of Mississippi, 2012).

democracy abroad while denying it at home. Ultimately, the campaign's legacy lies in proving that while Black patriotism could successfully mobilize internal community and challenge prevailing perceptions of Black citizenship, it could not, by itself, compel a systemic change from the dominant white power structure committed to its own ideological priorities. This realization led to a tactical evolution; Black Americans took the collective identity they forged during the Double V Campaign and transformed it into more direct-action coalitions that would eventually define the Civil Rights Movement.

Helen Dehnert is an undergraduate student at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, majoring in History with minors in Media and Journalism and Conflict Management. She works as an Undergraduate Research Assistant for the UNC History Department and her favorite topic to focus on is American History.

Issues with Split Resistances: A Case Study of the Official and Provisional Irish Republican Armies

Virginia Feagans
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

Abstract: Between the years of 1969 and 1998, the violence of the Troubles ravaged Northern Ireland. Throughout the Troubles, there were many different organizations fighting against both the British government and amongst themselves. The conflict led to the deaths of thousands, and this paper examines how the divide between the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Official Irish Republican Army served to work against the very goals they wished to reach. The feud was violent, and many innocent people lost their lives in the feud's crossfire. The paramilitary organizations also had similarities in both goals and tactics, which led to public confusion between the two. The OIRA and PIRA failed to work as one unit to reach their common goal, which ultimately led to the organizations failing to get their desired outcome.

Background

From 1919-1922, the Irish Republican Army waged war against the British government during the Irish War of Independence. The IRA served as a template for the creation of the paramilitary groups active during the thirty-year conflict in Northern Ireland known as the Troubles (1969-1998). Ireland's Troubles were a conflict between Irish republicans, mostly comprised of Irish Catholics residing in Northern Ireland who wished to form a union with the free state of Ireland and those in Northern Ireland who wanted Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. The Irish Catholic minority also faced police brutality and prejudice from British forces and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, both of which were made up of a Protestant majority.[1] The tensions between the two factions came to a head during the August 1969 riots, which ended with "at least six killed, one a nine-year-old boy, and more than 500 wounded."[2] As a result, the British government deployed military troops into Northern Ireland to prevent the escalation of the conflict happening between people of varying ideologies (Irish Catholics, Protestant Unionists, and police forces). The deployment inspired members of the IRA to once again become active in fighting against British occupation.[3] After British forces opened fire on unarmed protesters on Bloody

---

1 David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles* (Blackstaff Press, 2000), chap. 4, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/directrule/mckittrick00.htm.

2 *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 17, 1969, f4.

3 Gianluca De Fazio, "Unpacking Violent Contention: The Troubles in Northern

Sunday in 1972, the Troubles started to see a dramatic increase in violence.[4]

Introduction

Throughout the Troubles, the paramilitary organizations fighting in Northern Ireland experienced schisms, leading to a rise in the number of different paramilitary groups fighting the same force. While many paramilitary organizations fought in the Troubles, this paper focuses on the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). In the late 1960s, amid rising tensions and violence from both Irish Nationalists and British Unionists, the remnants of the Irish Republican Army left over from the Irish War of Independence officially split into two organizations. They became colloquially known as the "Stickies" or the Official IRA (the remainder of the "old guard") and the "Provisionals" or the Provisional IRA (the younger, more radical Irish Republicans).[5] The main reason for the split was differences in ideologies between members of the IRA; while the OIRA remained more closely aligned with leftist ideology, the PIRA was a more traditionally republican-nationalist group.[6] Those who split off to create the Provisional IRA also held the belief that the Official IRA was not aggressive enough in their resistance tactics.[7] Further, each organization saw itself as the sole legitimate fighting force. However, the two groups were so similar that it became easy for their beliefs to be conflated, and they were often viewed as being part of the same organization by the public. While OIRA was the remnants of the unified IRA, the PIRA was more successful as a fighting force carrying on the IRA's legacy.[8]

Both the PIRA and the OIRA were closely connected to political parties in Northern Ireland who were trying to make change through the less violent sphere of politics. Throughout the Troubles, the Sinn Fein and PIRA remained in close contact with each other. Allegedly, the leader of the Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams, was a major leader of the PIRA. While there is evidence supporting the claim, there is not enough to prove its validity. One of the most well-known reasons for the speculation is the corroborating testimonies given by Dolours Price and Brendan Hughes, detailed in *Say Nothing.*[9] These accounts state that

---

Ireland, 1968–1972," *Taylor and Francis Online* 32 (2020), 1691–1711.

4 "The Troubles: What led to Northern Ireland's conflict?," BBC, accessed Nov 13, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-northern-ireland-49299800.

5 Abigail Sterner, "The Ira, the Catholic Church, and the Politics of Martyrdom in the Context of the Northern Irish Troubles" (PhD diss., The University of Vermont, 2025), 38, ProQuest (31936743).

6 Artefacts Audit: A report of the material culture of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland, *Healing Through Remembering,* Nov 13, 2025, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/victims/docs/group/htr/htr_08_artefacts.pdf

7 *The Observer*, Feb 14, 1971, 2.

8 Artefacts Audit: A report of the material culture of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland

9 Patrick Radden Keefe, *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*

(William Collins, 2018).

Gerry Adams was the main driver behind much of the violence that occurred throughout the Troubles, including the infamous secret executions known as the Disappeared.

However, the OIRA had ties with the left-leaning Workers' Party of Ireland. While the Workers' Party did not have as much support as the Sinn Fein, it did play an active role throughout the Troubles. Where the Sinn Fein believed that Northern Ireland needed to focus on unifying with the Free State of Ireland, the Workers' Party believed that it would only be possible if people of both Protestant and Catholic beliefs would be able to unify and work together toward a shared goal. The nationalist aspect of the Workers' Party and of the OIRA kept them closely aligned with both the PIRA and the Sinn Fein, as they both were working toward a similar goal. The political ties of both the Sinn Fein and the Workers' Party to paramilitary organizations meant that all aspects of the Troubles were interconnected in some way.

The PIRA remained the most prevalent fighting faction during the Troubles, not only due to its ties with the widely popular Sinn Fein, but also because the OIRA became relatively dormant in 1972. After declaring a cease fire and proclaiming that the OIRA was limiting actions to "reserving only the right of self-defense and the defense of areas if attacked by the British Military or by sectarian forces,"[10] the OIRA declined in both membership and popularity. According to the original cease-fire released by the Official IRA, the members felt that their fighting would make the Troubles worse. They also wrote that their "suspension of hostilities" would help in avoiding a "sectarian civil war which the Provisional campaign is threatening to provoke."[11] While the OIRA continued to be an active player, the PIRA continued to be much more aggressive in their resistance techniques, which resulted in them becoming the most influential Irish resistance group during the Troubles.

Many people across Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1998 suffered horrors as extreme as serious injury or death to both their families and themselves due to the violence of the resistance efforts and the effects of feuds between organizations like the OIRA and the PIRA. Over the course of its 30 years, the Troubles led to the deaths of 3,720 people, injuries of 47,541, and "every day of the year marks the anniversary of someone's death as a result of conflict in and about Northern Ireland."[12] When there are different groups resisting the same force, there are often many clashes in ideology, resistance

10 "Statement issued by the Executive of the Northern Republican Clubs announcing the suspension of all armed military actions by the IRA [Irish Republican Army]," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Cain Archive, accessed Nov 13, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/nai/1972/nai_DFA-2003-17-300_1972-05-29.pdf.

11 "Statement issued by the Executive of the Northern Republican Clubs announcing the suspension of all armed military actions by the IRA [Irish Republican Army]," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Cain Archive, accessed Nov 13.

12 "Fact Sheet on the conflict in and about Northern Ireland," Cain Archive, accessed Nov 13, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/victims/docs/group/htr/day_of_reflection/htr_0607c.pdf

tactics, and public support. However, even though they saw themselves as different, the OIRA and the PIRA often got misconstrued as being different factions of the same resistance group because they appeared similar in all three of those areas on the surface, which led to a decrease in their legitimacy and fighting power. Despite their closely aligning beliefs, the violent nature of the relationship between the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Official Irish Republican Army often led to them working against each other. The organizational confusion and feuds during the Troubles led to the decline of crucial support from the Irish public and paramilitary sympathizers, which then made resistance efforts less effective. By using the tensions between the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA as a case study, this paper examines why resistance movements with the same goals split, and what the violence that follows can mean for the overall success of those resistance movements.

Historiography

The IRA of the Irish War of Independence and the paramilitary organizations of the Troubles have been extensively researched. This work fits into the existing scholarship by going into depth on how the OIRA and the PIRA worked against each other as different paramilitary organizations that almost consistently engaged in violence with each other over the course of the Troubles. This provides a case study on the importance of different organizations working together to reach a common goal, as well as what it means for resistance movements when they fail to do so.

The literature surrounding the different paramilitary groups active in the Troubles often uses these types of sources to provide first-hand accounts of the Troubles and discuss what they imply. However, when discussing feuds, rarely are the larger implications for what the interorganizational fighting analyzed in terms of what it meant for the success of the fighting. While many historians use the Troubles as a modern-day case study to investigate the implications of terrorist organizations, as well as to show what there is to be learned about the success rate of terrorist organizations, there is a gap in the amount being said about the inter-organizational fighting. Conflict is not uncommon between terrorist organizations, and it is important to study what this infighting could mean for the success or failure of freedom movements via violent means. For instance, in 2011, Kacper Rekawek, a scholar in Terrorist Studies, looked into the feud between the OIRA and the PIRA, as well the decline of the OIRA, but focused on their similarities and why they split. Little, if any, is mentioned about what the feud meant for the success of the paramilitary fighting. Those who research the feuds between the Irish paramilitary organizations, like Andrew Sanders in his article published in 2022, “Decapitation and paramilitary feuds in Northern Ireland, 1969-1992,” focus on how the feuds harmed the groups on an organizational level but fail to discuss how they harm the resistance movement overall. By looking into the feuds between the OIRA and the PIRA, this paper will attempt to fill that gap and discuss what the fighting between organizations with similar causes could mean for the success of resistance movements, not just the implications for the groups individually.

Issues with Tactical Similarities

The "old IRA" of the Irish War of Independence split into the PIRA and the OIRA due to differences in ideology, approaches to resistance, and disputes in how to lead a resistance movement. However, at their core, the two groups maintained a similar goal: to end British control and brutality in Northern Ireland and unite with free Ireland to create one nation. Many Irish Catholics agreed with this line of thought, however, it often became difficult to know which organization to support. Within the Troubles, the similarity of ideals between the two organizations often led to confusion between the two groups. In his article "Stickies" and "Provos": Confusion Within Irish Republicanism, 1969-1975," Kacper Rekawek discusses how the similarities led to confusion in the public sphere in Ireland. According to Rekawek, there were even instances of recruits joining an organization on a "haphazard" basis, not knowing or caring which best suited their beliefs because they all appeared to be doing the same thing.[13]

Throughout the Troubles, the different organizations often utilized forms of guerrilla warfare to fight against the British —– and each other. While the OIRA limited its fighting to a defensive position after 1972, it continued to wage violent actions when it came to interorganizational fighting and retaliatory action. Throughout the Troubles, the PIRA detailed their set of directives in the PIRA *Green Book.* The *Green Book* "was a manual given to all newly recruited volunteers of the IRA, giving details on guerilla warfare tactics and details on what to do if under interrogation."[14] The front reads "Whatever you say, say nothing" and lays out the beliefs and purposes of the PIRA. Throughout the *Green Book*, the PIRA lays out the tactics it intends for its members to use, telling them to become well acquainted with weaponry and interrogation to be a successful member of the organization.

The result of the organization's violence is featured heavily in the media surrounding the Troubles, with little evidence that the organization changed strategies over the years. In 1973, the PIRA notoriously planted multiple car bombs (a common tactic) in London, and over ten years later in 1989, they were still placing car bombs, as one went off in Warrenpoint Co Down.[15] Even though the Official IRA was known to use tactics similar to those of the PIRA, part of the reason for the split was because the OIRA was not as aggressive as members of the PIRA thought it should be. The OIRA did use violence in its resistance, though it was more retaliatory in nature.

Neither the OIRA nor the PIRA strictly followed their guidelines throughout the Troubles. The OIRA often engaged in violent altercations with

---

13 Kacper Rekawek, ""Stickies" and "Provos": Confusion Within Irish Republicanism, 1969-1975," in *Political Ideology in Ireland: From the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. Olivier Coquelin, Patrick Galliou, and Thierry Robin (Routledge, 1995), 241-257.

14 "Provisional IRA Green Book - Volumes 1 and 2," Internet Archive, accessed Nov 13, https://archive.org/details/ira-green-book-volumes-1-and-2/page/18/mode/2up.

15 *The Irish Times*, Apr 14, 1989, 8; *The Irish Times*, Sep 11, 1973, 11.

the PIRA and members of the RUC, despite the fact they no longer considered themselves an active paramilitary organization. The OIRA also took a very similar approach in its paramilitary tactics during those altercations, with the difference between them and the PIRA being that the OIRA attempted to limit unnecessary deaths as often as possible. Despite this commitment, the OIRA took responsibility for blowing up a naval launch in Cork in 1971, and in 1972, the OIRA caused an explosion at a paratroop base near London.[16] With tensions resurfacing with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement 1998, the OIRA set off "a series of arson and petrol bomb attacks."[17] Similarly, the PIRA used the *Green Book* as a set of suggestive guidelines rather than an actual directive. One prominent example of the *Green Book* not being followed is seen in the discrepancy between the way the *Green Book* states that no capital punishment would be given to non-PIRA associates, and the frequency with which the opposite would happen. In an interview (kept anonymous due to threat of violence), one young man recalls how he had to live in fear of the PIRA catching him and punishing him for shoplifting, and discusses how common it was for members of the PIRA to use harsh punishments on non-members for small reasons.[18] Even though the groups initially split due to differences in opinions of how the IRA should be run, the varied nature in which the instructions of the OIRA and the PIRA were followed shows how it might appear as if the two organizations were still following the same guidelines. When the OIRA was at its most prominent in the early 1970s, the government often did not know which organization to place blame on and relied on organizational spokespersons from both the PIRA and the OIRA to either confirm or deny their involvement.[19] In 1970, both groups denied taking part in the killing of two members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and in February of 1971, the "officials" released a statement to the *Irish Times* that "members of the "Provisional" IRA were responsible for the shooting of a young republican, John MacGuinness" in Ballymurphey,[20] blaming them for a death related to the Troubles. However, when it came to cases of neither organization taking responsibility for a crime fitting their tactics and styles, it led to speculation of which organization was responsible. The ambiguity around these deaths left room for the media and British Government to paint Irish nationals as volatile. It also created nervousness around the people who sympathize with the ideals of the OIRA or the PIRA, whether intentionally or unintentionally. This uncertainty exemplifies how a split in resistance organizations can decrease the possibility of public support and hurt the overall movement. It leaves room for governments and news outlets to blame the organizations for crimes they might not have committed and create more fear around them than there already was. Each organization had similar end goals, and if they had been willing to work together in their resistance efforts, it would have erased the confusion and led to more public support. Since they did not make

16 *The Irish Times*, Feb 23, 1972, 1; *The Irish Times*, Apr 21, 1971, 1.

17 *Irish Times*, Nov 28, 1998, 4.

18 Marie Smyth and Marie-Therese Fay, *Personal Accounts from Northern Ireland's Troubles: Public Conflict, Private Loss* (Pluto Press, 2000), 123-130.

19 *The Irish Times*, Aug 13, 1970, 1 and 9.

20 *The Irish Times*, Feb 8, 1971, 1.

it clear what the differences in their ideologies were, they were not able to stop inhibiting each other from preventing people from knowing who they wanted to support.

Media Confusion and Misrepresentation

Due to the similarities in tactics and goals, the OIRA and the PIRA were liable to being labeled as the same organization. In 1972, *The Atlanta Constitution* published an article titled "Internal Violence Charged to IRA Wing," which refers to the OIRA and the PIRA as the same organization throughout. However, by 1972, the organizations were well-established as separate entities with differentiations in leadership and ideals.[21] In 1975, *The Boston Globe* released an article claiming that the recent "inner feud- worst since '20s. Official Faction seeks vengeance,"[22] and painted the organizations as sects of a larger, centralized Irish Republican Army instead of acknowledging how the organizations as two separate entities. The issue of the PIRA and the OIRA being mistaken as the same organization appears throughout coverage of the Troubles While their goals and resistance efforts were quite similar, they had some key political differences. While the OIRA was connected to the Workers' Party and socialist movements, the PIRA was deeply connected to the Sinn Fein, a Republican Party composed of Irish Nationals and those fighting for a free Northern Ireland.

The inaccuracy and confusion in the media were exacerbated when there was obvious paramilitary action, but neither group was willing to take responsibility for it, as evidenced in 1970. According to an article published by *The Irish Times,* neither the PIRA nor the OIRA was willing to take responsibility for the deaths two RUC members,[23] which lent itself to speculation around the circumstances under which the crime was committed. Four years later, in 1974, *The Irish Times* inaccurately reported on the killing of 34-year-old Paul Tinnelly, claiming that his death was "attributed to… an internal Republican conflict."[24] The article discusses how his death was connected to the fact he switched from being a member of the PIRA to the OIRA, as they called his switch evidence of his "apparent ideological flexibility."[25] The article highlights how the two groups were perceived in Irish publications as the same organization, when they were completely separate entities. Both these articles show how media representation can create difficulties for people to differentiate between what both organizations truly believed in. The way the Irish media chose to represent the two organizations shows how the split harmed their overall goals. Not only was the difference in their ideologies often being ignored, but they were also prone to being combined into the same organization. The OIRA and the PIRA's misrepresentation in media spheres further highlights how splits in resistance organizations can harm the movement, as public confusion increases when the media inaccurately reports on how the organizations.

---

21 *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 10, 1972, 12b.

22 *The Boston Globe*, Nov 16, 1975, 47.

23 *The Irish Times*, Aug 13, 1970, 1 and 9.

24 *The Irish Times*, Jun 3, 1974, 1.

25 *The Irish Times*, Jun 3, 1974, 1.

Interorganizational Feuds

The biggest issue facing the resistance efforts of the PIRA and the OIRA were the violent feuds and conflicts between the organizations. While the disagreements between the two groups were not considered to be feuds until after the split, they were preceded by initial disagreements between the two groups that would eventually split, such as whether or not the killing of Protestants was a necessary tactic and differences in political viewpoints.[26] As stated by Kacper Rekawek, the conflicts were "fueled by local rivalries and struggles for dominance in a given locale, the feuds often escalated from scuffles outside Belfast pubs 51 into confrontations between armed units of the two IRAs….The OIRA was involved in at least three serious feuds with the PIRA (1971, 1975, and 1977)."[27] While the OIRA was almost nonexistent as a fighting force after they called a ceasefire in 1972, those who remained of the paramilitary organization continued to engage in fighting with members of the PIRA throughout the Troubles.[28] The fighting affected civilians, members of each organization, and even members of the Sinn Fein. While Protestant civilians and businesses were targeted at a higher rate due during the Troubles due to differing beliefs to the paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland, throughout the Troubles, many civilians, Protestant and Catholic alike, got caught in the middle of many shootouts, bombings, and suspicions.[29]

Catholic civilians dying due to the violence between the OIRA and the PIRA had a particularly negative effect on the viewpoints held by possible paramilitary sympathizers. Not only were these feuds leading to the death of innocents who might have, at one time, supported the paramilitary cause, but it also led to people being less likely to support any paramilitary organization because of it.

The PIRA and the OIRA lost a lot of support due to their violent feuds with each other. One of the biggest issues they faced was catching civilians in the crossfire. In 1972, *The Baltimore Sun* ran an article detailing the feud, claiming that the "Official wing of the IRA shuns reconciliation with Provisional Wing,"[30] stating that the two organizations had no desire to come to a truce and stop the feuding. The article also writes how the feud "played 'into the hands of [their] enemies,'"[31] but neither group was willing to come to a peace with the other. In an interview with Catholic Troubles survivor Margeret Valente, the effects of the feuds and violence are laid out in stark detail. She lost her brother-in-law, her husband, and her daughter's partner during the Troubles. Valente made it clear that she did not want anything to do with any sort of paramili-

26 Andrew Sanders, "Decapitation and paramilitary feuds in Northern Ireland, 1969-1992," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15 (June 2022), 805-822.

27 Kacper Rekawek, ""Their History Is a Bit Like Our History": Comparative Assessment of the Official and the Provisional IRAs," 688-708.

28 *The Irish Times*, Oct 19, 1992, 4.

29 Smyth and Fay, *Personal Accounts*, 63-73.

30 *The Sun*, Dec 18, 1972, A8.

31 *The Sun*, Dec 18, 1972, A8

tary organization after that, even though she was initially sympathetic to their cause.[32] Her story is not a unique one, and these types of experiences made it difficult for many people outside of paramilitary organizations like the PIRA and the OIRA to support them. By the time the Troubles were coming to an end, many people were voting on the best compromise to end the violence, not to achieve freedom from the British government. The violence caused by the paramilitary organizations replaced the desperation for a free Northern Ireland with a desperation for peace and safety, showing how interorganizational feuds and large amounts of violence lead to a decline in public sympathy. No longer is the public concerned with the issues the paramilitary organizations are trying to solve; they are concerned with putting a stop to the killing.

The feuds also led the two organizations to kill each other's members. The slaughter lasted almost as long as the Troubles themselves did, with the publishing of conflict reports from 1969 to 1998. It led to heightened tensions between the two groups seeking retaliation for their own and losing more members than they could afford in the process. When the Troubles were at their peak, fighting became one of the largest issues facing resistance efforts. Not only did this mean that more people than necessary were dying, but it also meant that potential supporters for each organization became skeptical of the true capabilities of those organizations and many people questioned whether they were truly able to fight the British forces effectively. In 1971, before the OIRA called its ceasefire, the OIRA accused the PIRA of "waging a campaign of violence against its members."[33] In 1977, there were reports of the PIRA killing two OIRA members in Belfast.[34] In 1998, the two groups were still actively fighting each other, despite peace talks and potential PIRA ceasefires due to the Good Friday Agreement.[35] The killing also led to diminishing Irish support at a time they needed it the most. It made it difficult for both the PIRA and the OIRA to achieve their goals because the public is no longer willing to provide the resources the group cannot get on their own. Since the PIRA and the OIRA were fighting, they lost crucial respect and support from Irish Catholics residing in Northern Ireland. The fighting reflects how feuds between paramilitary organizations can diminish support on their home front.

Not only did the paramilitary organizations fighting in Northern Ireland need the respect and aid of the Irish people, but they also relied on aid from foreign actors. In the case of the Troubles, they needed the financial support provided to them from organizations like Northern Ireland Aid Committee (NORAID). The money provided by NORAID was used to buy artillery and other supplies for militant resistance.[36] This international support and funding, shows why it was crucial that the paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland

32 Smyth and Fay, *Personal Accounts*, 20-33.

33 *The Jerusalem Post,* May 10, 1972, 2.

34 *South China Morning Post,* July 30, 1977, 20.

35 *The Irish Times*, June 12, 1998, 8.

36 Patrick T. McShane, "From militancy to peacebuilding: the evolution of Irish American nationalism during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, 1969-1998," *Millersville University: Repository and Digital Archive,* (2019), 6.

continued to maintain an image that allowed them to continue to receive that funding. However, this is where the issue of interorganizational violence once again becomes present. In the United States, many newspapers across the country reported on the feuds between the PIRA and the OIRA, as well as the deaths that came with it. In 1971, *The New York Times* wrote on the differences and hostilities between the PIRA and the OIRA, once again referring to the two organizations as factions of each other and showing how the OIRA was openly speaking out against choices made by the PIRA.[37] In 1972, *The Baltimore Sun* ran an article titled "Official wing of IRA shuns reconciliation with Provisionals," in which they detailed the murder of a 25-year-old who was killed by the PIRA after mailing her wedding invitations. Later in the article, they stated that "a motion to halt the rift between the two IRA factions because it played 'into the hands of our enemies" – the British – was soundly rejected by hostile delegates;"[38] the description makes the two groups out to be unwilling to compromise and likely to kill more civilians. The young woman's death would only serve to garner less sympathy for the Irish republicans, as it showed the American public how the organizations were feuding with each other; how they caused the deaths of innocents, not just fighting the British forces that were oppressing them. It further emphasizes how splits and feuds within resistance movements can undermine said movements instead of allowing the different organizations to achieve their various goals. If these organizations were to stop receiving funding, they would no longer be able to acquire supplies crucial to the success of their movement.

The feud between the OIRA and the PIRA also led to members of their respective political parties being dragged into it. These political parties were trying to advocate for the wants of the organizations that were the most closely related to them, but due to the feuding between the OIRA and the PIRA, both the Sinn Fein and the Workers' Party had some violent run-ins with both organizations. After the last officially recognized feud between the OIRA and the PIRA in 1975, the discussions and signing of the Good Friday Agreement led to another rise in tensions between the two organizations. In June of 1998, a few months after the Good Friday Agreement was signed,[39] tensions escalated and ultimately led to the two organizations attacking members of each other's respective political parties. After an Official IRA beating of a "Provisional supporter,"[40] the PIRA "broke into the home of a Workers' Party member and shot him twice in the left thigh and once in the right thigh;"[41] the PIRA went on to attack other members of the party. In retaliation, the OIRA attempted a shooting on a member of the Sinn Fein. While these attacks did not result in the deaths of any party members, it still made the groups look volatile —— it appeared as if, with the larger role political actors were taking in the resolu-

37 *The New York Times*, Mar 11, 1972, 8.

38 *The Irish Times*, Sep 11, 1973, 11.

39 "About the Good Friday Agreement," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, accessed Nov 13, https://www.ireland.ie/en/dfa/role-policies/northern-ireland/about-the-good-friday-agreement/.

40 *The Irish Times*, June 12, 1998, 8.

41 *The Irish Times, June 12, 1998, 8.*

tion of the Troubles, they became targets for paramilitary organizations due to their public status. Even though Sean Hayes, a Sinn Fein councilor running in assembly elections said that “he did not believe republicans would be drawn into a feud and … ‘they have an agenda they are working on, and it does not include feuds, but an end to all conflict,’”[42] the violence carried out by both organizations cast the paramilitaries in a way that made them look prone to unnecessary violence that had nothing to do with securing a free Northern Ireland. If the death of paramilitaries and innocent people was not enough for the public to question the true capabilities and validity of the paramilitary resisters, the attacks and abuses of a political party members was enough to spark anger and mistrust in the greater public sphere. The violence of the PIRA and the OIRA carried out against political party members is another example of how splits in paramilitary organizations can affect more than just the groups themselves. These splits can lead to violence against people attempting to resolve conflict through peaceful means and ultimately undermine what the paramilitary organizations are trying to achieve.

Results of a multiple-player resistance

The Troubles officially came to an end on April 10, 1998, with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The Good Friday Agreement, for many people, was a symbol of all the violence Northern Ireland faced and overcame. However, at its core, the Good Friday Agreement was a compromise between the British government and the people of Northern Ireland. Despite the PIRA and OIRA claiming that they fought on behalf of the Irish-Catholics, the Irish public passed the agreement with an overwhelming majority to end the violence occurring across the region. The Good Friday Agreement, while demilitarizing Northern Ireland, did not allow for the region to unify with the Republic of Ireland when it was initially passed in 1998. However, there is a clause within the agreement that would allow for Northern Ireland to join the Republic of Ireland if both regions decided to revote in the future, with the decision ruling in favor of the majority.[43] For many paramilitaries, this was a disappointing outcome, and made their resistance efforts feel futile. Part of the reason this act passed with such a high vote count (with 71% of Northen Irish citizens and 94% of Southern Irish citizens voting ‘Yes’)[44] was because of the people of Northern Ireland’s desperation to put an end to the violence that left practically no family untouched. It reflects how violence caused by paramilitary actions often makes a public that was once supportive of their cause willing to pass laws and compromises that will end the violence, instead of continuing to push for the demands they were once eager to support.

The Good Friday Agreement is widely considered to be “a major breakthrough in the Northern Ireland peace process.”[45] However, it did not result

---

42 *The Irish Times, June 12, 1998, 8.*

43 “The Good Friday Agreement,” accessed Nov 13, https://assets.ireland.ie/documents/good-friday-agreement.pdf.

44 “The Good Friday Agreement.”

45 McShane,“From militancy to peacebuilding : the evolution of Irish American

in Northern Ireland's unification with the Republic of Ireland, which was the ultimate goal of many of the members of the PIRA and OIRA. Brendan Hughes spoke out against the Good Friday Agreement, saying in an interview that "All the questions raised in the course of this struggle have not been answered and the republican struggle has not been concluded" and spoke on the "futility of it all. From a nationalist perspective alone what we have now we could have had at any time in the last twenty-five years. But even nationalist demands don't seem to matter anymore."[46] Many members of the PIRA shared Hughes's view, as the agreement essentially made 30 years of violence and conflict feel wasted because Northern Ireland, even today, is still a part of the United Kingdom and under British rule. The Good Friday agreement was one of the hardest worked on bills, and "after 700 days of negotiations, it was announced that the Agreement was reached. All parties involved in the talks attended the final plenary session … bringing an end to decades of violence in Northern Ireland."[47] Part of violence the agreement wanted to stop between the feuding paramilitary organizations of the Troubles. Without the constant feuding and deaths as a result, the Agreement might have ended differently, with more focus on pleasing the demands of the Irish Nationalists instead of aiming for peace throughout the war-torn region. The Good Friday Agreement shows how split organizations and the conflict that comes from the split results in a lack of success. At the end of the violence, the greater public will favor peace over continuing to fight an armed resistance to achieve their full demands.

Conclusion

Throughout the Troubles, the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Official Irish Republican Army often worked against each other in the fight towards a unified Ireland, as well as the removal of British discrimination against Irish Catholics. Studying the challenges that paramilitary organizations faced in the Troubles can lead to a better understanding of what makes military resistance ultimately succeed or fail in the eyes of the organization. Regardless, despite the Good Friday Agreement bringing peace and relief to the public of Northern Ireland, the 30 years of the Troubles ended differently than members of both organizations wanted.

The issues paramilitary groups like the PIRA and the OIRA faced during the Troubles are not unique to them, and they can show why organizations within resistance movements might split and how that split could harm the overall movement. In the case of the Troubles, the struggles of the paramilitary groups ultimately ended in the Irish republicans to reach a compromise with the British government; however, these struggles can also be detrimental to a paramilitary organization. It shows how crucial it is for a successful resistance

nationalism during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, 1969-1998," 1-11.

46 "Interview With Brendan Hughes," The Blanket: A Journal of Protest and Dissent, accessed Nov 13, https://theblanket.library.indianapolis.iu.edu/BH50208.html.

47 "About the Good Friday Agreement," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, accessed Nov 13, https://www.ireland.ie/en/dfa/role-policies/northern-ireland/about-the-good-friday-agreement/.

movement to not allow themselves to resort to infighting when they want to reach a common goal. The Official Irish Republican Army and the Provisional Irish Republican Army exemplify just how important it is and provide a case study on just how significant interorganizational conflict can be to the success and failure of resistance movements.

Virginia Feagans is an undergraduate student at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, where she studies History with a concentration in War, Revolution, and Society and English and Comparative Literature. She also works as an undergraduate editor for *Traces: The UNC-CH Journal of History*. She is also involved in *The Daily Tar Heel* on Copy Desk and Alpha Phi Omega Service Fraternity.

Vice and Visibility: Donaldson Wells King's Struggle Against Police Harassment of LGBTQ+ Individuals (1970s-1990s)

Chelsea Chantel Faith Harris
University of North Carolina - Charlotte

Abstract: This paper examines the activism and political involvement of Donaldson Wells King, a pioneering journalist and gay rights activist who used his platform to confront the police entrapment of gay men from the 1970s to the 1990s. Aiming to foster a sense of safety and solidarity within Charlotte, North Carolina's queer community, King's reporting and advocacy exposed the Charlotte Police Department's (CPD's) systemic targeting of LGBTQ+ individuals. King's reporting challenged the CPD and other local institutions that perpetuated homophobia and criminalization. Through newsletters, advocacy, and public writing, he worked to transform journalism into a tool for liberation and collective empowerment. Drawing on archival materials and engaging with scholarship on queer southern history, police surveillance, and community resistance, this research situates King's work as central to the broader struggle for justice and visibility for queer Southerners in the late twentieth century.

Introduction

Ian walked briskly out of a small North Carolina bookstore, feeling uneasy. He had noticed another man standing in the dimly lit parking lot, staring at him.[1] In an attempt to avoid confrontation, he headed straight for his car but was halted by the stranger's approach before he could leave. The stranger, after introducing himself as "John," quickly pivoted their idle conversation into flirtation, then interrogation, with his questions growing more personal and probing. "What are you into," he asked. "Do you like to fool around?"[2] When Ian cautiously asked if John was a cop, he denied Ian's accusation. As their conversation grew more personal Ian grew slightly more confident and admitted he liked to "go down sometimes."[3]

John suggested they both drive their cars to a more private spot. When Ian pulled into the empty parking lot, a third car suddenly blocked his escape.

---

1 Mckenzie, Ian-Andrew. *Entrapment Letter to Don King*. 14 September 1995. University of North Carolina at Charlotte Collection. Box 1, Folder [Arrests].
2 Mckenzie. Entrapment Letter.
3 Mckenzie. Entrapment Letter.

Panic set in. He tried to reverse, his thoughts jumping to fears of an assault, but John appeared at his window, flashing a badge. Relief turned to dread in an instant. Within moments, he was handcuffed by John and shoved against his car, not read his rights, and forced to endure the mocking laughter of John and his colleagues.[4] They joked about their entrapment tactics, placing bets on how many men they could ensnare that night—rarely, if ever, pausing to consider the lives they were destroying.[5]

Ian's experience was not an isolated incident but part of a widespread practice of police entrapment during an era of heightened homophobia. It was a tactic rooted in systemic prejudice, often deployed in parking lots, bars, and parks across America, targeting gay men under the guise of maintaining public morality, arresting them for "Crimes Against Nature" and solicitation charges.[6] Entrapment cases like Ian's eventually captured the attention of pioneering journalist and activist Donaldson Wells King, who shed light on these abuses by exposing how vice patrols employed specific strategies to discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals. He spent his career confronting unjust policing practices and the societal structures that allowed them to flourish, such as job discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, state-sanctioned surveillance, and the widespread normalization of anti-gay violence.

As one of the earliest documented openly gay journalists in Charlotte, North Carolina, King used his journalistic skills to challenge anti-gay policies, bigoted public figures, and homophobic culture. Working at the *Charlotte Observer* from the mid-1970s to the early-1980s, he hoped to share stories that uplifted positive images of LGBTQ+ life as opposed to other articles of the time period that discussed them carelessly during a period when such visibility was nearly unheard of in the South.[7]

The lack of media coverage on the reality of queer life allowed politicians and police forces to perpetuate institutional biases against gay men, continuing the cycle of violence and exclusion that reinforced social discrimination. To combat this harassment, King worked to become a key figure in the fight for gay rights in Charlotte. He was ultimately known within the LGBTQ+ community as an advocate for legal and social reforms that helped secure greater civil rights, workplace protections, and better visibility for queer people in North Carolina and across the country.

King collaborated with other activists to establish safe spaces for queer people in Charlotte. Beginning in the mid-to-late 1970s, he emerged as a prom-

4 Mckenzie. Entrapment Letter.
5 Mckenzie. Entrapment Letter.
6 *North Carolina General Statutes*, § 14-177 (2024).
7 *Donaldson Wells King papers*, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

inent leader who helped shape the gay rights movement during a pivotal era. He organized and led one of Charlotte's first LGBTQ+ sociopolitical organizations, Dignity and Acceptance. In 1981, he co-founded Queen City Quordinators (QCQ) and, by 1983, he co-published *Queen City Notes*, which later became Q-*Notes*, the city's longstanding monthly queer newsletter.[8] Through these platforms, King created spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals could share their experiences and access crucial resources and support. Most significantly, King and his peers used these spaces to raise awareness among LGBTQ+ people about the discriminatory practices used against them, how to protect themselves, and the importance of political involvement.

King helped create vital community spaces, such as Charlotte's first gay bookstore, *Friends of Dorothy*, and the first cable show to center queer themes, *The Gay/Lesbian Forum*. These projects provided much-needed solidarity, education, and visibility, ensuring that LGBTQ+ individuals could access resources and build a stronger sense of belonging.[9] Through these meeting places for queer connection and conversation, Don King became familiar with the practice of police entrapment. He heard first-hand accounts of undercover officers luring, arresting, and humiliating friends and community members, revealing a coordinated effort to police queer existence.

During the 1970s, homosexuality in Charlotte remained deeply stigmatized by a mix of institutional, political and religious forces and was largely forced to remain hidden. As the city emerged as a financial hub, its growth was marked by deep-seated racial tensions, LGBTQ+ marginalization, and systematic police corruption.[10] Prominent church leaders denounced homosexuality from the pulpit as reflected in a 1978 Charlotte Observer submission by conservative minister Michael D. Stone. He argued that "freedom of expression does not imply freedom of behavior," framing homosexuality and lesbianism as moral failings rather than identities protected by the First Amendment, reinforcing moral stigma.[11] Stone claimed that "to restrict these sins and those who practice them does not deny constitutional rights," and that equating "homosexual rights" with minority rights was "unjustified."[12] His language exemplified how religious conservatism shaped public discourse in Charlotte, where homosexuality was often portrayed as a threat to moral order rather than a civil rights concern. In

8 Donaldson Wells King papers, J. Murrey Atkins Library.

9 The phrase "Friends of Dorothy" was a coded expression used in the 1970s–1980s by queer people to discreetly identify themselves or others as gay, referencing *The Wizard of Oz*'s Dorothy Gale, a figure long associated with queer culture.

10 J. T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 49.

11 Michael D. Stone, "[Article on homosexuality in Charlotte]," *Charlotte Observer*, January 13, 1978.

12 Stone, "[Article on homosexuality in Charlotte]."

response, Donaldson Wells King published his own submission, "*Homosexuals Are Not Perverts*," in which he directly challenged what he called the minister's "classic mistake" of "lumping gay people in with prostitutes, child pornographers, and every other type of sexual perversion."[13] King rejected the idea that queerness was a behavior, asserting that "being gay is not a choice." He further condemned Stone's implication that gay citizens were undeserving of the same legal protections as others in North Carolina. This exchange, published in one of Charlotte's most prominent newspapers, illustrates the ideological tensions of the late 1970s—a period when queer Charlotteans were beginning to assert their humanity and challenge the city's entrenched moral conservatism in public forums.

Amid social discussions about homosexuality, hostility against LGBTQ+ individuals intensified, fueled by waves of conservative backlash. For instance, Anita Bryant's infamous and widely followed "Save Our Children" campaign epitomized the era's public opinion on LGBTQ+ life and culture in the 70s. Framing the furthering of gay rights and visibility as a threat to traditional family values and as a safety concern for children, Anita Bryant and her reactionary rhetoric galvanized support for already established anti-gay policies.[14] Her campaign not only reinforced existing prejudices but also helped legitimize state-sanctioned surveillance of queer communities. As historian Anna Lvovsky argues, the vice patrols and police efforts to surveil and infiltrate LGBTQ+ spaces during this period played a significant role in shaping public opinion about gay life.[15] Rather than relying on firsthand perspectives from LGBTQ+ individuals, public perceptions were informed by law enforcement narratives, which often cast gay communities as inherently criminal or deviant.[16] This was part of a broader strategy to justify the policing and dismantling of these communities, further perpetuating stigma and hostility. Anti-gay conservatives did not expect their actions to mobilize passionate resistance from LGBTQ+ people and allies.[17]

This climate of fear, secrecy, and disgust surrounding queer life fueled anti-gay policies that led to decades of discrimination. Charlotte responded to the growing visibility of gay life with ordinances and laws designed to suppress

13 Donaldson Wells King, "Homosexuals Are Not Perverts," *Charlotte Observer*, January 21, 1978.

14 Judy Gaultney, "Bryant's Anti-Gay Message Heard by 4,000; 70 protest," *Charlotte Observer*. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

15 Anna Lvovsky, " *Vice Patrol: Cops, Courts, and the Struggle over Urban Gay Life before Stonewall*" (2021), 76.

16 Lvovsky, "*Vice Patrol*," 77.

17 Unknown, "Gays Lost Bid For Approval," *The New York Times*. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

LGBTQ+ communities.[18] These measures were often enforced through police entrapment tactics, which targeted gay men in public spaces and bars under the guise of morality laws such as North Carolina's Crimes Against Nature Law (CAN). Entrapment often led to public shaming, arrests, and life-altering consequences, forcing many individuals to live in secrecy, showing how they chose to hide their sexuality or gender expression at the risk of being targeted.[19] For those who didn't capitulate, they resisted by organizing, protesting, and publicly asserting their identities despite the risks. Activists and journalists like King pushed back through community networks, newsletters, and local advocacy groups, using visibility as a form of defiance against discriminatory policies and police intimidation.

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, King became a key figure in advocating for legal and social reforms with lasting benefits for the community. During this time, he remained a vocal critic of police harassment and entrapment of gay men. His advocacy contributed to real changes in how local law enforcement treated the LGBTQ+ community. By directly challenging police corruption and the baiting of homosexuals, and through using his role as an organizer and journalist to expose law enforcement's targeting of queer individuals, King provided much-needed resistance against these tactics for his LGBTQ+ peers.

Historiography

This paper draws on a range of scholarship examining the intersections of queer identity, legal systems, and activism in America. Scholarships on queer history and interactions with law enforcement in the United States have explored the criminalization of queer identities, institutional discrimination, and the resulting challenges for LGBTQ+ communities. Works focused on legal frameworks and policing practices provided a foundation for understanding which institutional barriers queer people face. J.R. Spence's *The Law of Crime Against Nature* (1954) examined how same-sex relationships were criminalized, making note of the early legal studies that defined queer identities as deviant and immoral.[20] Steven A. Rosen's *Police Harassment of Homosexual Women and Men in New York City, 1960-1980* (1980) expanded upon Spence's focus on legal discrimination, as she describes the antagonistic relationship between law enforcement and urban queer communities.[21] Similarly, Bernstein and Kostelac's *Lavender and Blue* (2002) offered insights into police attitudes towards

18 J. Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 24.

19 Unknown author, "Gay in Corporate," *Charlotte Observer.* UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

20 J. R. Spence, *The Law of Crime Against Nature* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Law Review, 1954), 312.

21 Steven A. Rosen, "Police Harassment of Homosexual Women and Men in New York City, 1960-1980," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* (1980): 159-90.

LGBTQ+ individuals, revealing systemic discrimination within law enforcement that affected queer experiences nationwide.[22] Elizabeth Peel's 1999 study on violence against lesbians and gay men explored how prejudice and institutional barriers influenced decisions around reporting crimes, emphasizing the social and psychological toll of navigating hostile systems on queer communities.[23]

A second subfield of queer scholarship focuses on the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ Q+ individuals in the South and how these communities created spaces of resilience and visibility despite social hostility. John Howard's *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (2001) provided one of the first in-depth examinations of queer life in the rural South, revealing how LGBTQ+ individuals expressed their identities in subversive ways, even within conservative environments.[24] James Sears' *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones* (2001) expanded on Howard's findings by examining the creation of visible public spaces and communities in the post-Stonewall South, highlighting the emergence of distinctly queer Southern spaces.[25] Anna Lvovsky's *Vice Patrol* (2021) addressed the Southern queer experience, focusing on LGBTQ+ communities' responses to police harassment, the legal system, and the AIDS epidemic.[26] Further contextualizing these experiences, Matthew Lassiter's *The Silent Majority* (2007) examined the role of conservative suburban politics in the 'Sun Belt South,' arguing that the region's political climate reinforced a repressive environment that affected queer life on both public and private levels.[27] Collectively, these studies illustrate the tension between oppression and resilience that shaped Southern LGBTQ+ life. This research aims extends that conversation by tracing how activists like Donaldson Wells King, resisted legal and social constraints through organizing, visibility, and the pursuit of lasting change. Through examining King's correspondence, public statements, and activism in Charlotte, this study highlights how local movements in the South not only mirrored but also expanded upon national efforts for LGBTQ+ liberation. In doing so, it reveals how queer Charlotteans navigated moral, legal, and institutional repression while cultivating spaces of resistance and care that redefined queer survival and visibility in the late twentieth-century South.

The late twentieth century saw safety become a critical issue for

22 Mary Bernstein and Constance Kostelac, "Lavender and Blue: Attitudes about Homosexuality and Behavior towards Lesbians and Gay Men among Police Officers." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice. 304*

23 Elizabeth Peel, "Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men: Decision Making in Reporting and Not Reporting Crime," *Feminism & Psychology* 9, no. 2 (1999)

24 Howard, *Men Like That*, 10

25 Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 3.

26 Lvovsky, "*Vice Patrol*," 8.

27 M. D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 6.

LGBTQ+ communities, as they were increasingly targeted by incidents such as gay-bashing, police entrapment, and false arrests.[28] Primary newspaper articles from this era shed light on how societal prejudices translated into violence against LGBTQ+ individuals, such as gay-bashing.[29] One article, "It Was More Than Simple Assault," provides a chilling, detailed description of an anti-gay attack on a young man, Jeff. After leaving a gay bar and being followed by two assailants, Jeff found himself dragged out of his car at gunpoint and eventually physically assaulted, leaving him with a broken arm.[30] Another article reported that "there has been an increase in bashing in virtually every major city," underscoring the widespread nature of anti-queer violence and the escalating hostility faced by LGBTQ+ people nationwide. The piece detailed various responses emerging from queer communities and their allies, such as the formation of a 24-hour civilian patrol in San Francisco dedicated to protecting gay men from attacks, and efforts by some police departments to assign officers as official liaisons between law enforcement and the city's gay community. Together, these examples reflect a growing awareness of the need for organized defense and institutional accountability amid a national climate of fear and aggression toward queer people.

The right-wing efforts of the 1970s-1980s to condemn and criminalize queerness reinforced the brutal realities of physical violence with the silent complicity enforced by fear. Many victims chose not to report homophobic crimes to the police because they feared being outed.[31] At the time, LGBTQ+ people had few, if any, legal protections, meaning discriminatory practices and violence against them were not met with meaningful recourse, resulting in job termination, social ostracization, or possible legal repercussions. As a result, many instances of gay bashing were ignored or unrecorded by law enforcement.[32] A 1993 study found that over 80% of anti-gay violence went unreported, leaving most victims without protection or recourse.[33] This pervasive lack of acknowledgment deepened the isolation experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals, often contributing to severe mental health challenges, including depression and suicide. The constant threat of discrimination in the workplace, coupled with a lack of institutional support, reflects the systemic nature of oppression faced byLGBTQ+ individuals.

---

28 LaFleur Paysour, "Safety is Becoming a Gay Rights Issue," *Charlotte Observer*, April 15, 1981. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

29 Bill Curry, "Violence Against Gays Is Increasing," *Charlotte Observer*, March 8, 1981. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

30 Rich Oppel, "It Was More Than A Simple Assault/'Attack on Jeff," *Charlotte Observer*, May 8, 1981. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

31 Rosen, "Police Harassment," 9.

32 National Lesbian and Gay Task Force, "*1993 Statistics of Anti-Gay Violence,*" 5. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

33 National Lesbian and Gay Task Force, "*1993 Statistics,"* 8.

King, through his journalism and activism, consistently urged LGBTQ+ individuals to report incidents of harassment and violence, even when they doubted the likelihood of a fair response.[34] For LGBTQ+ individuals, seeking help from police often felt like trading one threat for another. Law enforcement, deeply complicit in enforcing anti-LGBTQ+ policies, not only failed to protect victims but actively perpetuated harm through entrapment, harassment, and abuse of power.[35] Anti-sodomy laws in North Carolina, particularly the CAN Law, criminalized same-sex relations, leading to the arrest and public shaming of LGBTQ+ individuals. These laws, coupled with employment discrimination, forced many to conceal their sexual orientation to avoid economic and social ruin. Furthermore, southern cities like Charlotte sought to suppress the visibility of "growing gay life" and communities through ordinances aimed at curbing public expression and gathering.[36]

King argued that without reports, "there is no real way to establish patterns of attack…or to pinpoint possible suspects."[37] He maintained that the refusal of law enforcement to take these reports seriously not only perpetuated homophobic violence but also emboldened police to extort and entrap queer individuals.[38] Lvovsky compares the brutal treatment faced by civil rights activists during the same period, describing how LGBTQ+ people and protestors were routinely mistreated by civilians and law enforcement alike without the guarantee of legal redress.[39] This cyclical abuse isolated LGBTQ+ people further and made it nearly impossible to hold perpetrators accountable, revealing the complicity of law enforcement in failing to protect victims and the resulting mistrust within the community. The U.S. government's role in this hostility was clear when it enacted a ban on homosexual immigration.[40] Meanwhile, media coverage such as the article "Feds Told to Ban Homosexuals," amplified public fear and portrayed LGBTQ+ people as societal threats.[41] Such framing demonstrates how the media helped reinforce and justify discriminatory laws and practices.

Hostility towards LGBTQ+ people extended beyond local and national ordinances to aggressive policing practices that criminalized framed existence

34 LaFleur Paysour, "Safety is Becoming a Gay Rights Issue."

35 Rosen, "Police Harassment," 9.

36 Unknown, "Mayor Sends Police Guard to Gay Area," November 28, 1980. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

37 LaFleur Paysour, "Safety is Becoming a Gay Rights Issue."

38 Donaldson Wells King, "Homosexuals Are Not Perverts," *Charlotte Observer*. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

39 Lvovsky, "*Vice Patrol*," 48

40 Unknown, "Federal Agency Told To Bar Homosexuals From Entering U.S.," New York Times, December 27, 1979.

41 Unknown, "Immigration Told to Ban Admitted Homosexuals," Los Angeles Times, September 10, 1980.

as a threat to public morality. Don King's activism against entrapment emerged in direct response to anti-gay policies, which weaponized affirmation biases against homosexuality to justify targeted, widespread surveillance and intrusive policing. Police harassment at gay bars and other perceived gathering places became commonplace, reflecting both a local and national strategy of vice patrols aimed at dismantling gay life.[42] The pervasive vice patrols targeting gay meeting spots reflected local enforcement priorities and the broader state-sponsored agenda of surveillance and moral regulation.[43] Headlines such as *"*ENTICING — Vice Officers Waging War at Bookstores, Parks*"* and *"*Charlotte Police Cracking Down on Park Cruisers*"* capture how policing in Charlotte fixated on monitoring and criminalizing queer spaces under the guise of maintaining public order.[44] King's efforts to educate the community and advocate for legal defense strategies sought to counter these narratives and disrupt the institutionalized policing of queer life in North Carolina.

The Historical Record of Entrapment and Community Response

To emphasize the long-standing tensions between law enforcement and LGBTQ+ communities, it is essential to examine a press release from King's *Political Police Task Watch Force* regarding an upcoming meeting focused on law enforcement techniques used in Charlotte. The task force statement asserts that the Charlotte Police Department is sending plainclothes officers into parks to solicit gay men and arrest them for solicitation. It specifies how "the decoys mimic actions that they think are used by men looking for male sexual partners," and that "men arrested through these police techniques are usually charged with public masturbation or solicitation for crimes against nature, both misdemeanors."[45] In response, the meeting aimed to educate gay men and other queer communities about these entrapment tactics, emphasizing the importance of awareness to reduce wrongful arrests and counter further stigmatization.[46]

The Task Force meeting aimed to address the practice of officers often targeting gay men in parks, restrooms, or other public areas, in spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals frequented.[47] These operations involved undercover

42 Donaldson Wells King, "Homosexuals Face the Closed-Closet Prejudice," *Smokestack Publications*. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.
43 Lvovsky, "*Vice Patrol*," 48
44 Unknown, *"*Charlotte Police Cracking Down on Park Cruisers,*" QNotes* (Charlotte, NC), October 1988, reprinted in "Gay Sex and Crime: History and the Future," *QNotes Carolinas*.
45 Political Task Watch Force, "April 8 Meeting," April 8, 1997. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.
46 Donaldson Wells King to Jack Bullard, 1987 "*Enclosed Letters*." UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.
47 29 Year Old Black Lesbian, "*Statement of Sexual Harassment by Police Officer,"* 1992. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

officers feigning interest and initiating conversations, then escalating interactions in ways that led to arrests, often for vague charges like lewd behavior or public indecency. In one testimony, a young man, Scott Lee Wilson, recalled being approached by a plainclothes officer while waiting in his car outside the airport.[48] After having a general conversation with the officer, the officer abruptly asked Scott if he "enjoyed oral sex."[49] Scott quickly tried change the conversation to avoid being overheard. However, the officer persisted, repeating his question. Pressured and unsure how to respond, Scott cautiously said he was "okay" with oral sex.[50] The officer then suggested they go to Scott's place to "watch a movie."[51] Scott agreed.[52] Moments later, as they drove away, Scott was pulled over and arrested by the same plainclothes officer and his partner—an encounter that starkly illustrates the deceptive and predatory tactics vice squads used to criminalize queer men in Charlotte.[53] King collected hundreds of testimonies like Scott's and Ian's, hoping to shine a light on the widespread injustices faced by LGBTQ+ individuals.

King's detailed collection of accounts of entrapment and police raids on gay bars, bookstores, and parks reveals how state and local institutions weaponized fear to undermine queer communities.[54] Such tactics reinforced societal taboos around homosexuality, placing gay men at continual risk of criminal prosecution while deepening the stigma against their existence. In many cases, undercover officers employed suggestive language or gestures to lure unsuspecting men into what they believed was a consensual interaction, only to arrest them once physical or verbal confirmation of interest was expressed.[55] This tactic blurred the lines of entrapment, as men often responded to initiated advances rather than instigating them. It underscored a system designed to criminalize queer desire under the guise of law enforcement. As Sears explores, these were not isolated incidents but rather part of a coordinated effort to control and stigmatize LGBTQ+ lives, targeting spaces that served as havens for self-expression and solidarity.[56] Similarly, Rosen shows that these undercover stings, framed as efforts to uphold public morality, were in fact designed publicly humiliate and further marginalize LGBTQ+ individuals.[57] The raids were accompanied by

---

48 Scott Lee Wilson. "*Entrapment Testimony"* 1995. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

49 Wilson, "*Entrapment Testimony"* 1995.

50 Wilson, "*Entrapment Testimony"* 1995.

51 Wilson, "*Entrapment Testimony"* 1995.

52 Wilson, "*Entrapment Testimony"* 1995.

53 Wilson, "*Entrapment Testimony"* 1995.

54 Sears, "*Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*," 36.

55 60 Year Old Arrested Man, "Anonymous Statement to Don King," 1987. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

56 Sears, "*Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*," 29

57 Rosen, "Police Harassment," 10.

arrests that exposed individuals to public shaming, jeopardized their employment, and even led to estrangement from their families. Such actions disrupted the fragile networks of support within queer communities, reinforcing the perception that LGBTQ+ individuals were perpetual outsiders subject to surveillance and punishment.[58]

King's Task Force would meet to discuss strategic political actions to combat this unjust political, social, and legal persecution of gay and lesbian individuals. Their task force did so through practical strategies and legal education.[59] King and his partners sought to foster solidarity and empower their audience by challenging police harassment and discrimination. They sought to lay the critical groundwork for future advancements in LGBTQ+ rights by resisting systemic oppression and advocating for community resilience. The Task Force's *Goals and Methods* report detailed the organizations central objectives. King specifically noted they needed to "use statistics and testimony to convince lawmakers to repeal the CAN law as it impacts consenting adults."[60] The goals and methods on this document reveal the priorities of its leaders and the broader sociopolitical context in which it emerged. An additional key primary document, *Political Education* released by the Task Force outlined a comprehensive approach to political participation as a cornerstone of their activism. The Task Force organized corporate groups for LGBTQ+ individuals, educated public officials on queer hardships, and emphasized policy change as the primary objective. The group maintained that voter education and voter registration were central components, alongside active involvement in local election campaigns through fundraising events and grassroots mobilization.[61] The document further highlights the significance of an "in your face" direct action organization, aiming to create a force that neither tolerates nor entertains homophobia in any form. This approach emphasized consistency in resisting homophobic actions and responding to homophobic narratives in media and public discourse.

The Task Force prioritized repealing the CAN laws, which criminalized the private lives of consenting adults and stood as a significant legal and symbolic barrier to LGBTQ+ equality.[62] Guided by King's leadership, his group organized efforts to respond to issues like homophobic news media, workplace discrimination, and homophobia in local and national politics.[63] Although the Task Force's advocacy brought critical attention to the injustices embedded in such statutes, the CAN laws themselves were never formally repealed in North

---

58 Lvovsky, "*Vice Patrol," 154*

59 Political Police Watch Task Force, "*Political Education*," April 12, 1995. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

60 Political Police Watch Task Force "*Goals and Methods."*

61 Political Police Watch Task Force "*Political Education,"* April 12, 1995.

62 Political Police Watch Task Force "*Political Education,"* April 12, 1995.

63 Political Police Watch Task Force "*Political Education,"* April 12, 1995.

Carolina; rather, they were rendered unenforceable after the Supreme Court's Lawrence v. Texas (2003) decision, which invalidated similar sodomy laws nationwide. Nevertheless, the efforts of the Task Force's activism group instrumentally shaped Charlotte's gay liberation movement, illuminating the urgency of confronting police entrapment, cultivating solidarity, and asserting the right of LGBTQ+ individuals to safety and public legitimacy. Through its legal and organizational strategies, the group sought to create a climate of surveillance and fear into one of empowerment, visibility, and collective resistance within the LGBTQ+ community.

Records collected by King and other activists serve as an archive of oppression and a blueprint for activism. By documenting the first-hand accounts of wrongfully arrested gay men, King captured the scope of institutional discrimination and the human cost of injustice. These records provided tangible evidence of systemic abuses and the weaponization of anti-sodomy laws. King's letter to Jack Bullard, which contained a collection of testimonies, exemplifies how data collection was not just about preserving stories but also about using them to expose systemic corruption and rally support for reform.[64] Through these efforts, activists directly confronted the narratives perpetuated by law enforcement and mainstream media that portrayed LGBTQ+ people as immoral and deserving of persecution.[65] By creating an archive of testimonies, King and his contemporaries laid the groundwork for legal challenges and community mobilization, transforming personal and justice into a collective demand for systemic change. King's dedication to collecting these testimonies underscores the power of storytelling as a tool for resistance and highlights the importance of preserving marginalized histories to achieve justice.

King was deeply committed to advancing LGBTQ+ liberation through direct engagement with police chiefs, political leaders, and public officials. Recognizing the necessity of dialogue, he often initiated reconstructive conversations to challenge discriminatory practices and policies. In his extensive journalistic work, King frequently responded to ignorant public comments made by leaders, using his platform to hold them accountable and demand clarity on their positions.[66] In a letter to Christian conservative Mayor Sue Myrick, Don King highlights the tension between Charlotte's queer community and law enforcement during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time when police surveillance and entrapment tactics continued to target gay men in public spaces. King urges her to articulate her views on entrapment and outline actionable reform plans by

64 Donaldson Wells King and Political Police Watch Task Force, "Special to *Q-Notes*," *Q-Notes*. March 1995. UNCC Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

65 Bernstein and Kostelac, "Lavender and Blue," 15.

66 Donaldson Wells King, "*Letter to the Honorable Sue Myrick.*" UNCC Charlotte Collection, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

asking her to use her "influence to lessen the fear, hatred and distrust… and to require that police officers refrain from tactics tainted by betrayal."[67] In King's plea, he details the common practice of entrapment at the hands of the Charlotte Police Department, noting how in the last week he's received at least "5 phone calls from men who have been arrested on charges of solicitation to commit crimes against nature."[68] By appealing directly to Myrick's authority, King sought protection from discriminatory policing and the recognition of queer people's right to safety and dignity in their own city.

In another letter to the deeply conservative senator, Jesse Helms, King implores the senator to reconsider his stance on the 1981 Family Protection Act that was proposed by Republican senator Paul Laxalt. This proposed amendment would negatively impact the Civil Rights Act and ensure "that any action taken by an employer against a homosexual shall not be considered an unlawful employment practice." Helms, one of the most outspoken anti-LGBTQ+ house members in the twentieth century, played a central role in shaping anti-gay policy and culture in North Carolina. As a former television commentator and legislator, he used his platform to denounce homosexuality as immoral, oppose AIDS funding that acknowledged queer communities, and promote legislation that reinforced discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals under the guise of protecting traditional values.

Highlighting its failure to protect gay employees from discrimination, King emphasized the moral and legal inconsistency in passing legal loopholes to deny individuals equal rights based on their sexual orientation.[69] He argued that such exclusions perpetuated systemic inequality and criticized the government's proposal to prohibit lawyers from receiving federal funds for handling cases involving individual discrimination against homosexuals.[70] By pointing out this policy's chilling effect on access to justice, King underscored how institutional barriers compounded the struggles of LGBTQ+ individuals. His letter exemplified his commitment to challenging both explicit and structural inequities, advocating for a more inclusive interpretation of civil rights protections. His relentless advocacy demonstrated a strategic and fearless approach to fostering change in a climate of pervasive hostility toward LGBTQ+ individuals.

Another example of King's staunch written defense of queer rights can be found in detailed inquiries to police chiefs, where he questioned the rationale behind undercover operations and the standards guiding the infiltration of queer

---

67 King, *"Letter to Sue Myrick."*

68 King, *"Letter to Sue Myrick."*

69 Donaldson Wells King, *"*Letter to the Honorable Jesse Helms*,"* January 15, 1981. UNCC Charlotte Collections. University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

70 King, "Letter to Jesse Helms.*"*

spaces.[71] In his letter to Chief Robert Kirchner, King wastes no time, posing three pointed questions about the police department's handling of gay male activity in public parks—whether complaints had been made, how they were addressed by the Police Department, and whether their enforcement programs had shown any innovative results.[72]

Conclusion

Donaldson Wells King's activism was crucial in increasing visibility and fighting for LGBTQ+ rights. Bridging marginalized communities and challenging institutional oppression, his unwavering dedication to combating police discrimination and advocating for legal and social change transformed the landscape for queer individuals in the region. Despite the setbacks the queer community faced, King fostered community solidarity and pushed for incremental progress. This is reflected by King's role in helping to organize Charlotte's first annual Pride events in 1994 and the growing queer representation in local media. King's efforts were part of a broader historical context where the LGBTQ+ community, emboldened by earlier acts of resistance and empowerment, became increasingly organized both physically and politically.[73]

Through his confrontational yet purposeful approach, King exposed systemic injustices faced by the LGBTQ+ community and sought to build more equitable relationships between local law enforcement and LGBTQ+ individuals. King's correspondence and community outreach, therefore, centered on exposing how the local vice squads targeted public cruising sites, used decoys, and solicited arrests under North Carolina's Crime Against Nature statutes. By drawing attention to these tactics, including the use of decoys and park stakeouts, King's community strategy aimed to transform individual fear and secrecy into collective resistance and public accountability.

These moments of defiance also underscored the necessity of political mobilization, as passionate organizers created powerful grassroots movements that fought daily for equality and survival. Inspired by this history, King focused on combating police entrapment and educating the community about their rights, seeking to break the silence that allowed injustices to continue and carrying the torch of activism into his advocacy.

Although not all the policy changes King championed were realized during his lifetime, his efforts laid a critical foundation for future advancements in LGBTQ+ rights. His legacy underscores the enduring power of grassroots

71 Donaldson Wells King, "Letter to Chief Ronnie Stone," July 23, 1993. UNCC Charlotte Collections. University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

72 Donaldson Wells King, "Letter to Chief Robert Kirchner," May 24, 1995. UNCC Charlotte Collections. University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

73 Sears, "*Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*," 37.

activism and the importance of perseverance in adversity. King's gentle yet resolute approach continues to inspire contemporary activists, serving as a reminder that even small steps toward equality can have a profound and lasting impact.

Chelsea Harris is a History and Education graduate of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, currently practicing for her LSATS.

Double Agent Orange: Transforming American Attitudes Towards Defoliation between 1961 and 1971

Margaret Frances Mead
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

Abstract: America's use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War remains one of the most controversial dimensions of United States military strategy. Yet, scholars have largely overlooked how contemporary Americans understood and justified defoliation as it occurred. How did American attitudes toward defoliation evolve during Operation Ranch Hand (1961–1971)? Utilizing close analysis of major newspaper coverage and declassified government documents, this paper argues that public perceptions of Agent Orange underwent a profound transformation over the course of the war. Operating within a post-World War II culture that encouraged technological solutions to societal problems and a conservationist framework that championed strategic manipulation of nature, Americans initially viewed defoliation as a sophisticated and humane tool for Cold War containment policies. By the late 1960s, however, the environmentalist movement popularized new ideas about ecological interdependence and nature's inherent worth, redefining Americans' relationship with the environment. Just a decade after Operation Ranch Hand's beginning, Americans condemned defoliation as "ecocide." This transformation illustrates how changing ideas about humanity's relationship with the natural world influenced America's foreign policy, international relations, and ethical boundaries of military strategy during the Vietnam War.

Introduction

During the Vietnam War, American planes sprayed 19 million gallons of herbicides over South Vietnam's forests to expose Viet Cong guerrillas and destroy farmland.[1] This program, codenamed "Operation Ranch Hand," occurred between 1961 and 1971. The herbicides caused deforestation, erosion, flooding, and soil nutrient loss across 5.5 million acres of South Vietnam, all of which persist to this day.[2] The most prolific of these herbicides, commonly known as "Agent Orange," caused soldiers to suffer cancers, liver damage, skin irritation,

1 David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the Scientists Who Changed the Way We Think About the Environment* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 70.

2 R. Scott Frey, "Agent Orange and America at War in Vietnam and Southeast Asia," *Human Ecology Review* 20, no. 1 (2013): 1–10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24707567.

respiratory problems, and birth defects, health consequences caused by exposure to 2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzodioxin (TCDD), a toxic byproduct of the herbicide's manufacturing.[3] These myriad health and environmental consequences cemented Agent Orange's controversial legacy in the decades following the Vietnam War, with harrowing testimonies from all sides of the war haunting newspaper headlines to the present day.[4]

While Americans' memories of Agent Orange over the last half-century are unfavorable, the herbicide was not always poorly perceived. Between Operation Ranch Hand's beginning in 1961 and its end in 1971, American attitudes towards defoliation shifted. Far from harmful, the public once viewed Agent Orange as an innovative technology to contain Communism in Southeast Asia. As the war progressed, Americans began to view Agent Orange as a weapon of mass destruction and called its effects "ecocide," reflecting new environmentalist ideas about nature's intrinsic worth.

Background: Vietnam and Operation Ranch Hand

United States (U.S.) involvement in Vietnam was the product of Cold War rivalries. Freed from French colonial rule in 1954, Vietnam was split into a communist North and an anti-communist South. Communist North Vietnam received military and financial support from the USSR and China and supported the National Liberation Front (NLF) or "Viet Cong," a South Vietnamese communist insurgent group. America, operating under Eisenhower's "Domino Theory" that once a nation "fell" to communism, its neighboring states would follow, backed the South Vietnamese government under Ngô Đình Diệm. American leaders viewed the struggle against North Vietnam and the NLF as a decisive front in the global struggle against Communism; controlling Vietnam through any means possible was necessary to defeat the U.S.S.R.

Vietnam's dense jungle foliage presented a barrier to American victory. The impenetrable forest enabled the Viet Cong to wage hit-and-run guerrilla warfare on South Vietnamese and American troops, leaving U.S. war planners fearful that soldiers would become "bogged down" in Vietnam's rainforests, river delta wetlands, and mangrove forests.[5] U.S. Army Officer Maxwell Taylor wrote that the NLF "[struck] at isolated government forces — then [disappeared] into the jungle."[6] This cumbersome jungle, teeming with hidden Viet

3 Frey, "Agent Orange and America at War in Vietnam and Southeast Asia."

4 Damien Cave, "Agent Orange Twisted Her Limbs. The U.S. Is Abandoning a Vow to Help.," *The New York Times*, February 17, 2025; Hannah Norman, "The Neglected U.S. Victims of Agent Orange," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2024; David Rising and Aniruddha Ghosal, "USAID Cuts Jeopardize Agent Orange Cleanup and Other Efforts Critical to Ties with Vietnam," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 2025.

5 Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide, 57.*

6 Maxwell Taylor, quoted in Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide, 57.*

Cong, appeared to American and South Vietnamese war planners as a weapon in enemy hands. To neutralize that weapon, the American government turned to a technological solution: herbicides.

On December 4, 1961, President Kennedy authorized American planes to spray herbicide across South Vietnam under the codename "Operation Ranch Hand."[7] Over the next decade, American planes sprayed more than 19 million gallons of herbicides across South Vietnam, using six chemicals: Agents "Pink", "Green," "Purple," "Blue," "White," and "Orange.".[8] Agent Orange was the most common and controversial.[9] The defoliation program had two objectives: (1) destruction of trees and plants to improve visibility for the military and (2) destruction of enemy food supplies.[10] The latter objective proved contentious from Operation Ranch Hand's beginning; strategists in the Kennedy Administration feared that targeting crops for defoliation invited accusations of chemical warfare. Ultimately, the Administration approved crop destruction under two stipulations: that only land "positively identified" as under Viet Cong control would be treated, and that affected civilians would be compensated.[11] In practice, both assurances proved difficult to uphold.[12]

Operation Ranch Hand expanded as American presence in Vietnam increased between 1966 and 1971.[13] By the late 1960s and early 1970s, emerging scientific evidence linked Agent Orange to birth defects, cancers, and skin conditions, in addition to environmental damage.[14] By 1970, over 40,000 U.S. veterans identified Agent Orange as the cause of serious health problems.[15] Responding to mounting public backlash, President Richard Nixon phased out Operation Ranch Hand in December of 1970.[16]

---

7 Edwin A. Martini, *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 25.

8 Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide, 70.*

9 Martini, *Agent Orange,* 23; Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide,* 70.

10 Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide,* 57-60.

11 McGeorge Bundy, "National Security Action Memoranda 115," *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, November 30, 1961, https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/jfknsf-332-017, 16.

12 Martini, *Agent Orange, 79-84*.

13 Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide,* 5, 15.

14 Paul Frederick Cecil, *Herbicidal Warfare: The Ranch Hand Project in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986), 161.

15 Ralph Blumenthal, "Vietnam Agent Orange Suit By Veterans Is Going to Trial: Trial Opens Tomorrow On Agent Orange Suit," *The New York Times*, May 6, 1984.

16 Institute of Medicine (US) Committee to Review the Health Effects in Vietnam Veterans of Exposure to Herbicides, *Veterans and Agent Orange: Health Effects of Herbicides Used in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 1994), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK236356

Why Americans Initially Saw Agent Orange as Innovative

Herbicidal warfare in Vietnam arose not from strategic necessity, but a developing political ideology that venerated scientific expertise as the most rational, moral, and modern instrument of state power. President John F. Kennedy's administration prioritized technological advancements to secure American hegemony during the Cold War.[17] Simultaneously, Americans largely operated within a pre-environmentalist conception of nature that viewed forests as neutral land, not ecosystems connected to human health.[18] Together, these assumptions allowed policymakers and journalists to embrace defoliation as a humane and technologically sophisticated method to contain communism in Southeast Asia.

Government Attitudes Toward Herbicidal Warfare

World War II galvanized the partnership between American technology and military. The government funded industries, universities, and research organizations to develop tanks, planes, machine guns, and military strategies. Programs, including the National Defense Research Committee and the Office of Scientific Research and Development, formalized an intimate partnership between government and academia.[19] Wartime demand for specialists further produced a growing number of civilian technicians trained in radar, communications, and electronics, normalizing the expectation that private civilian expertise would be used to advance military goals. The Manhattan Project, America's top-secret creation of the first nuclear weapon, required an unprecedented level of cooperation between scientists, military, reinforcing the role of private expertise in national defense and foreign policy. After 1945, scientific agencies like the Atomic Energy Commission, the Defense Atomic Support Agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the National Science Foundation were created to win the technological arms race and maintain America's "wartime momentum [through] scientific progress," according to President Harry Truman.[20] These Cold War institutions were the backbone of the military's strength, lending both firepower and prestige in America's battle with the Soviets. According to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, by 1961, the "solitary tinkerer" had been "overshadowed by task forces of scientists in laboratories and

17 Audra J. Wolfe, *Competing with the Soviets: Science, Technology, and the State in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 6.

18 J. Brooks Flippen, "Richard Nixon, Russell Train, and the Birth of Modern American Environmental Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 4 (September 2008): 613–38, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00715.

19 Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide, 38-44*.

20 Harry S. Truman, "Statement by the President Upon Signing Bill Creating the National Science Foundation," *Harry S. Truman Library and Museum*, May 10, 1950, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/120/statement-president-upon-signing-bill-creating-national-science.

testing fields."[21] American military preeminence now relied on private expertise more than ever, and Cold War victory required nonstop technological progress.

When President Kennedy assumed power in 1961, he framed the Cold War as a contest of scientific progress. At his inauguration, Kennedy entreated both sides of the Cold War "to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors" and to "explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us."[22] While a call for peace, Kennedy's statement emphasizes the threat of violence inherent to the technology being developed. According to Kennedy, America's goal was to use science to "explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce," lofty accomplishments only possible through America's scientific advancements. Underpinning these assertions is the threat that Kennedy didn't want to use science like the atom bomb against the Soviets, but he could if they violated his call for cooperation. For the Kennedy Administration, science was a way to maintain American power and prestige in the Cold War.

The dousing of Vietnam's jungles with herbicides during Operation Ranch Hand epitomized the Kennedy Administration's mindset. Internal memos framed defoliation as the most efficient tool for military control, highlighting strategists' desire for technological solutions to warfare. Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, emphasized herbicides' ability to "aid in the detection of Viet Cong units," "improve fields of fire," and "deny concealed… ambush sites to the Viet Cong," citing consultations with "research specialists" to support this strategy.[23] He wrote that "a single helicopter can spray one acre in about five seconds with very effective defoliant chemicals," justifying crop denial as a more efficient alternative to traditional warfare.[24] Secretary of State Dean Rusk reinforced McNamara's rationale, citing a precedent of British use of napalm, a flammable gel, and defoliation in Malaysia, characterizing chem-

---

21 Dwight D. Eisenhower, "President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Farewell Address (1961)," *National Archives*, January 17, 1961, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address.

22 John F. Kennedy, "President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address (1961)," J*ohn F. Kennedy Library National Archives and Records Administration*, Washington D.C., January 17, 1961, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-john-f-kennedys-inaugural-address.

23 Robert S. McNamara, "Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President," *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1961–1963, Volume II, Vietnam, 1962, August 1, 1962, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v02/d254.

24 Robert S. McNamara, "Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume II, Vietnam, 1962,* August 8, 1962, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v02/d262.

ical defoliation as a logical extension of accepted military practice.[25] Kennedy Administration officials argued that defoliation was the most effective path to victory, reflecting a fundamental belief in the power of Cold War science in maintaining American supremacy.

Public Discourse on Herbicidal Warfare

American newspapers in the early years of Operation Ranch Hand echoed the government's technocratic ideology. Articles characterized herbicides as innovative Cold War technology, rather than a controversial weapon. This media discourse is evidence that the American public, not just Washington officials, initially perceived Agent Orange as a modern, rational solution to Vietnam's environment.

Articles from the early 1960s characterize Operation Ranch Hand as efficient solution to the problems posed by Vietnam's jungle. A *New York Times* article published in June of 1961 reported that "the Army is experimenting with chemical warfare techniques for stripping jungle areas of foliage to expose guerilla fighters or other hostile forces or installations," presenting defoliation as laboratory science rather than wartime violence.[26] By describing the jungle itself as a hostile installation, the article reflects Americans' prevailing attitudes that nature was inert and existed to be manipulated for human ends. Similarly, in January of 1962, *The Washington Post* wrote that "new jungle war tactics" had been "polished to fight guerillas" in "South Vietnam's shadowy jungle."[27] Again, these articles highlight the scientific nature of Operation Ranch Hand, depicting defoliation as a refined, efficient response to the crude tactics of uncivilized guerillas. Another *NYT* article reported that "numerous techniques hitherto unseen in South Vietnam's jungle warfare are being inaugurated or are about to be used to help turn the tide of battle against the Viet Cong," emphasizing the extent to which Americans saw herbicides as an innovative tactic to secure a quick victory in Vietnam.[28]

This veneration of technology also appeared in firsthand veteran accounts. An American pilot told the *LA Times* in 1965 that the "white chemical clouds" of Agent Orange and "sickly-sweet fumes" were a "beautiful sight,"

---

25 Dean Rusk, "National Security Action Memoranda: Defoliant Operations in Vietnam," *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and* Museum, November 21, 1961, https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/jfknsf-332-017, 1.

26 Jack Raymond, "Army Seeks Way to Strip Jungles: Defoliation Could Expose Hidden Enemy Forces," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1961.

27 *Los Angeles Times,* "S. Viet-Nam Prepares for Counterblow: New Jungle War Tactics Polished to Fight Guerrillas," January 1, 1962.

28 Robert Trumbull, "Saigon Builds Up for Drive on Foe: Hopes New Techniques Will Turn Tide Against Reds Aide to Rusk Softens Charges Of Katanga Propaganda Drive Belgians Protest to Kennedys," *The New York Times*, January 1, 1962.

never expressing concern for his or the forest's health following such proximity to the chemicals.[29] Instead, his description highlights the novelty of Vietnam's "strange lands," characterizing defoliation as a new technique to overcome Vietnam's hostile environment. "Smoky the Bear would not like us," another Ranch Hand soldier told the *LA Times*. "We do not want to keep the jungle forests green."[30] Comments such as these reveal that American soldiers wanted to accomplish their defoliation missions, while concerns about Agent Orange's impacts on the environment were outright dismissed.

Even articles with reservations about defoliation were concerned about its efficacy, rather than its environmental consequences. A 1961 *NYT* column criticized herbicides that stripped forests of foliage in three days for taking "too long" to "satisfactorily and speedily clear a substantial area of jungle."[31] In March of 1962, a writer for *The Washington Post* remarked that the defoliation campaign had "flopped so far," citing experts that "suggested the results may have been poor because the experiment was tried during the dry season in Vietnam," illustrating a technocratic desire to develop solutions to the Vietnam war.[32] Furthermore, the article cited scientists who argue that "it is possible the chemicals will work better in the wet weather when the sap is running and the defoliants perhaps can get into the tree systems and kill their leaves."[33] Despite understanding that Agent Orange could travel through Vietnam's ecosystem during the wet season, the article never worried that the herbicide could infiltrate human "systems" via the same pathways. Rather, these articles assumed Agent Orange was safe, and merely sought to optimize performance through a machinelike tuning of nature

Newspapers also framed herbicides as crucial in the global struggle against communism. Explicitly framing the Vietnam War as a proxy war for the Cold War Powers, a 1962 *NYT* column labeled "Southeast Asia a Test for U.S." in the "war-without-war," alongside an accompanying map depicting Vietnam as a chessboard.[34] Other articles place defoliation within the context of the Cold War arms race. The *NYT* quoted the Army's Chief Chemical Officer's assertion that "the Soviet Union was ahead of the United States and her Allies in readiness for [chemical, bacteriological, and radiological] warfare," characterizing

29 Jack Foisie, "Daring U.S. Pilots Defoliate Jungle to Expose Lurking Viet Guerrillas: Defoliation Duty," *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1965.

30 Foisie, "Daring U.S. Pilots Defoliate Jungle to Expose Lurking Viet Guerrillas."

31 Raymond, "Army Seeks Way to Strip Jungles."

32 Fred S. Hoffman, "U.S. Defoliation Project In Viet-Nam Held Flop," *The Washington Post*, March 25, 1962.

33 Hoffman, "U.S. Defoliation Project In Viet-Nam Held Flop."

34 Max Frankel, "Southeast Asia a Test for U.S.: Many New Devices Are Being Used To Meet Communist Challenge Moscow's Aim Agreed to Truce Other Standards," *The New York Times*, January 7, 1962.

herbicides as an essential defense against Soviet attacks.[35] In 1964, a Vietnam veteran wrote an article in the *Washington Post* arguing that herbicidal warfare was necessary "to achieve the stabilization imperative to both Vietnam and the free world" and to "convince the communists that revolutionary guerilla warfare is no vehicle in which they can ride to world control."[36] According to a 1965 *LA Times* headline, "Daring U.S. pilots defoliate [the] jungle to expose lurking Viet Guerillas," drawing a moralistic duality between the brave, technologically advanced American solider and the underhanded, primitive NLF soldier.[37] Exemplifying the role of herbicides in Cold War technological battles, in 1964, the *LA Times* reported that "the Pentagon had discussed the possibility of low-yield nuclear weapons to clear the foliage, but that we would probably never resort to that method."[38] Implying that herbicides were the alternative to a nuclear bomb, the pinnacle of Cold War science, reveals the extent to which Americans saw herbicides as an innovative solution. Herbicides provided moderate, humane alternatives to further Cold War escalation.

Public Justifications for Operation Ranch Hand

U.S. officials justified Operation Ranch Hand to the American public by arguing that defoliation harmed plants, not people. By assuring that herbicides were nonlethal, the U.S. could employ Agent Orange as a valid weapon of war. Kennedy's Secretary of Defense assured him that "the spray agents to be employed are commercially produced in [America] and have been used for years…The agents have no harmful effects on humans, livestock, or soil. Their only effect is to kill the plant growth upon which sprayed."[39] The U.S. military also created and distributed a series of cartoon pamphlets to South Vietnamese civilians, explaining that the "spray will have no harmful effects on humans, livestock, or the soil."[40] A Pentagon source told the *LA Times* that Agent Orange "turns an entire, lush green area into dead brown within a day" and that it caused "sickness and nausea" to "the Viet Cong."[41] The newspaper characterized these

35 "Army Seeks Way to Strip Jungles," *The New York Times*.

36 Douglas Pike, "Viet-Nam as the Reds See It: Hundreds of Communist 'Liberator' Units Operate in Villages Seeking Political Control," *The Washington Post*, August 23, 1964.

37 Foisie, "Daring U.S. Pilots Defoliate Jungle to Expose Lurking Viet Guerrillas."

38 Morrie Ryskind, "'Truth, Crushed to Earth...' Huh?" *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1964.

39 Roswell Gilpatric, "Memorandum for the President," in *National Security Action Memoranda 115, Defoliant Operations in Vietnam,* John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, 3.

40 Martini, *Agent Orange, 76*.

41 "Army Buys Equipment for Jungle Defoliation: Chemical Sprays on Planes Could Be Used Against Communist Hideaways in Vietnam," *Los Angeles Times,* March 28, 1965.

effects as positive because of their supposedly nonlethal nature, illustrating the press's acceptance of the military's justifications for Agent Orange.

American media outlets accepted the military's premise that Agent Orange was nonlethal and published articles rebuking war crimes accusations from abroad. A 1962 *Washington Post* article reported that the "Russians… charge[d] that the United States had been helping the South Vietnamese to use poison chemicals to destroy big forest areas, rice, and other crops." The *Post* responded, "U.S. authorities said the experiment has been conducted…with effort not to harm crops or domestic animals." The article takes the government's defense: because Agent Orange is not harmful to humans, spraying it over South Vietnam is not chemical warfare. A 1962 *NYT* article similarly reported that the Viet Cong "have charged that…the chemical is dangerous to men and animals, as well as to foliage and crops." According to the article, the Pentagon denied defoliation's health effects and lamented that the "Viet Cong… have seized upon … the defoliating material for propaganda." In 1964, the *NYT* reported that "Cambodia accused the United States and South Vietnam of carrying out chemical warfare that killed 76 persons in six Cambodian villages," directly connecting defoliation to human harm.[42] However, the article rebuked Cambodia's accusation, stating that the herbicides were "said to be harmless to humans and animals," illustrating that the American press accepted its government's assertion that Agent Orange was safe.[43]

While Agent Orange sparked international controversy from the beginning of Operation Ranch Hand, American media sided with the military in the early years of the war. Publications reported war crimes accusations from Communist sources and refuted them with American officials' justifications. This drew an ideological line across the debate over the legality of Operation Ranch Hand, with sensational Communist criticism on one side and rational American legal defense on the other, reinforcing the public perception that Agent Orange was a morally neutral instrument of Cold War policy. Herbicides were a safe technology; its critics were ideologically motivated to question the expertise of the American government.

Rise of Environmentalism in America (1962-1970)

In the mid-1960s, many Americans' conceptions of the environment transformed. In 1962, marine biologist Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring,* a book that traced declining bald eagle populations to the pesticide DDT and argued that reckless use of herbicides and pesticides yield harmful downstream consequences. *Silent Spring* galvanized the environmentalist movement by

42 Sam Pope Brewer, "U.S. is Accused of Chemical War: Cambodia Charges at U.N. That Powder Killed 76," *The New York Times*, July 30, 1964.

43 Brewer, "“U.S. is Accused of Chemical War."

introducing ecological language to popular culture, laying the foundation for criticisms of Agent Orange. The previously dominant conservationist mindset understood the environment as a passive backdrop for human activity, a reservoir of resources such as raw materials, land for development, and natural beauty.[44] As the environmentalist movement gained traction, Americans increasingly understand nature as a dynamic ecological system with intrinsic value beyond humans. This shift laid the foundation for later critiques of herbicidal warfare.

Harnessing American anxieties over the atom bomb, *Silent Spring* compared irresponsible chemical use to nuclear fallout. Carson wrote that "the chemical weed killers are a bright new toy" and that "they give a giddy sense of power over nature to those who wield them."[45] This characterization of herbicidal warfare as a mechanism of control over the environment coincided with the technocratic, solution-oriented rationale of the Kennedy administration. Yet, unlike the architects of Operation Ranch Hand, Carson asked Americans to consider "the long range and less obvious effects" of chemical use.[46] Proponents of herbicides, she claimed, "easily [brush] aside" environmental consequences "as the baseless imaginings of pessimists."[47] In 1984, Ranch Hand veteran Paul Cecil reflected on *Silent Spring*, writing that it "arouse[d] widespread apprehension over the biological and ecological results of indiscriminate use of pesticides" and "warned of the unknown consequences of using weed killers."[48] *Silent Spring* asked suburban, middle-class Americans to reconsider their relationship with the environment, transforming humanity from a separate, dominate force over nature to one component of a broader ecological network.

A series of highly publicized environmental disasters in the late 1960s deepened this nascent environmentalist consciousness. Off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, an unprecedented oil spill prompted public outrage over its effects on California's interwoven marine ecology, from sea turtles to human fishermen. That same year, the oil-polluted Cuyahoga River caught fire, sparking national press coverage of a blazing fire caused by humans dumping "tons of chemicals daily into the filthy" river.[49] These disasters helped catalyze a national movement against industrial pollution and environmental neglect.[50] "Conservation is only half the picture," a 1969 *NYT* article wrote, because reckless development creates "more than the irreversible loss of the country's natural assets,"

44 Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide, 68*.
45 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 2002 ed. (Harper Collins, 1962), 119.
46 Carson, *Silent Spring,* 119.
47 Carson, *Silent Spring,* 119.
48 Cecil, *Herbicidal Warfare, 158*.
49 Gladwin Hill, "Hickel's Drive on Water Pollution Is Challenged," *The New York Times*, October 8, 1969.
50 Martini, *Agent Orange, 99*.

it "is a crisis of the survival and the soul…and of conscience."[51] Americans increasingly understood the environment as an interconnected, global network. Harm to the environment was therefore harm to everything within that network, including humans.

The rise in ecologically oriented politics galvanized the creation of new institutions and public rituals around environmental protection. On April 22, 1970, Wisconsin Senator Nelson Gaylord established the first Earth Day, hosting seminars about environmentalism modeled after antiwar teach-ins. Gaylord also advocated for the prohibition of Agent Orange in 1970, positioning environmentalism as a reason for the antiwar movement.[52] Newspapers reported Gaylord's connection between environmental health and war, writing that "the American environment…is a problem whose existence is perpetuated by the expenditure of $25 billion a year on the war in Vietnam."[53] Such advocacy for environmental legislation and regulatory frameworks recognized environmental degradation as a public health threat.

By 1970, the environmental movement became reframed. It was no longer just a resource that's worth was defined by the value humans could derive from it. Anxieties about environmental devastation from reckless human activity caused Americans to view nature as a network of plants, animals, and humans. Reflecting on Operation Ranch Hand, CBS News remarked that "no one knows what kind of silent spring will come to Vietnam long after the war is over."[54] Americans now expressed concern not only for nature in their own backyards, but for the distant ecosystems of Southeast Asia, recognizing a global, interconnected environment.

A supreme pragmatist, President Richard Nixon capitalized on environmentalism's popularity among American voters. At his 1970 State of the Union Address, he declared that "the great question of the Seventies is: shall we make our peace with nature and begin to make reparations for the damage we have done to our air, to our land, and to our water?"[55] Between 1969 and 1970, Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the Council on Environmental Quality. He

---

51 Ada Louise Huxtable, "The Crisis of the Environment," *The New York Times*, December 29, 1969.

52 Emanuel Perlmutter, "2 Senate Candidates Attack Defoliant Use in War," *The New York Times*, August 17, 1970.

53 Richard Harwood, "Earth Day Stirs Nation: Millions Observe Earth Day in U.S.," General, *The Washington Post*, April 23, 1970.

54 Flippen, "Richard Nixon, Russell Train, and the Birth of Modern American Environmental Diplomacy."

55 Richard Nixon, Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 22, 1970, in Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, eds., *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/241063.

signed into law the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Preservation Act, thus institutionalizing environmentalist ideas.[56] In an address to Congress, Nixon further appealed to environmentalism, lamenting that "we…have too casually and too long abused our natural environment," thus characterizing pollution as violence to nature and by extension, humans.[57] To rectify these abuses, Nixon called "for fundamentally new philosophies of land, air and water use."[58] The environmentalist movement gave rise to new ideologies and institutions that reshaped how Americans understood the natural world.

Environmentalism permeated American life. Following federal actions, New Jersey's governor quickly proposed a state environmental agency.[59] For some, Nixon's environmentalist legislation was insufficient: Maine's Senator Edmund Muskie called the EPA "a positive step in fighting pollution," but one that "did not go far enough," illustrating the extent to which Americans demanded environmentalist policy.[60]

Beyond politics, artists adopted environmentalism, further embedding it in American culture. In her 1970 hit, "Big Yellow Taxi," folk artist Joni Mitchell expressed environmentalist anxieties introduced in Carson's *Silent Spring*, singing "hey farmer, farmer put away that DDT now / Give me spots on my apples, but leave me the birds and the bees."[61] Motown legend Marvin Gaye asked "Where did all the blue skies go? / Poison is the wind that blows" in his 1971 environmental protest song "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)."[62] In 1971, the Beach Boys wondered "Don't you think it's sad / What's happened to

56 *The "Carbon Dioxide Problem": Nixon's Inner Circle Debates the Climate Crisis*, National Security Archive, Climate Change Transparency Project, April 26, 2024, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/climate-change-transparency-project/2024-04-26/carbon-dioxide-problem-nixons-inner.

57 Richard Nixon, "Special Message to the Congress on Environmental Quality," February 10, 1970, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/240088.

58 Nixon, "Special Message to the Congress on Environmental Quality."

59 "Jersey Governor to Ask Environmental Agency*,"* *The New York Times*, April 4, 1970, http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/jersey-governor-ask-environmental-agency/docview/119007954/se-2.

60 Thomas O'Toole, "Nixon Forms New Units on Environment: Nixon to Consolidate 8 Units into New Pollution Agency," The Washington Post, July 10, 1970, http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/nixon-forms-new-units-on-environment/docview/147936757/se-2.

61 Joni Mitchell, "Big Yellow Taxi," track on *Ladies of the Canyon* (Reprise Records, 1970).

62 Marvin Gaye, "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)," track on *What's Going On* (Tamla Records, 1971).

the water?"[63] Despite spanning different genres, audiences, and values, influential artists from across America converged around environmentalism during the 1970s. Artists expressed ethical anxieties about humanity's impact on nature, illustrating a philosophical shift that understood the environment as having intrinsic moral value.

Americans Begin to See Agent Orange as "Ecocide" (1966–1971)

The environmentalist paradigm that emerged in the late 1960s fundamentally transformed how Americans interpreted defoliation. Whereas the pre-environmentalist worldview understood defoliation as a neutral manipulation of Vietnam's landscape, it now appeared as an assault on a fragile ecological system. The environmentalist movement introduced Americans to ideas about nature's intrinsic value, seeing ecosystems as worth protecting simply because they were living. This replaced the previous conservationist paradigm that derived an environment's value from the resources humans could extract from it, such as lumber, land for development, and even aesthetic beauty. Because of this change in the moral value of nature, Americans reinterpreted defoliation in Vietnam as violence against the environment itself.

Scientists, once the architects of defoliation, were now commonly cited in newspapers criticizing Operation Ranch Hand for its destructive effects on the Vietnamese environment. The public consensus about the Agent Orange's strategic benefits had dissolved. An anthropologist told the *NYT* in 1967 that "our defoliation in napalming of the countryside" may have engineered the conditions for "a massive plague…in South Vietnam."[64] A *Washington Post* article from 1968 quoted a scientist's assertion that "the removal of forest cover…may result in accelerating the conversion of lateritic soils...into laterite rock, which would irreversibly lower the potential and productive capacity of the entire environment."[65] In 1968, the *LA Times* reported that "the chemical defoliation in Vietnam's jungles and forests may be doing permanent damage to its wildlife, soils, and streams…defoliants could be disrupting the Vietnamese balance of nature." A 1968 *Washington Post* article criticized defoliation for endangering animals like the "doue languar and the crested gibbon..the Sumatran rhinoceros, the crow-antlered deer, and wild cows."[66] Not only were scientists reevaluating

---

63 The Beach Boys, "Don't Go Near the Water," track on *Surf's Up* (Brother/Reprise Records, 1971).

64 "Anthropologist Sees a Threat of a Major Plague in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, December 3, 1967.

65 Tomas O'Toole, "Vietnam Defoliation Seen Wildlife Threat: Defoliants' Use in Vietnam Is Feared Peril to Wildlife Extraction to Threat Alteration Unknown Example Is Cited 2 Million Acres Sprayed Damage Reported Ambush Rates Cut," *The Washington Post*, February 11, 1968.

66 "Viet Defoliation Damage Could Be Permanent: Pentagon-Inspired Report Shows Chemicals Might Disrupt Nature's Balance CHEMICALS," *Los Angeles Times*,

the effects of defoliation on Vietnam's ecological balance, these findings were published in major periodicals across America. Americans increasingly understood defoliation as inherently violent because of the damage it imparted on Vietnam's plants and animals.

Religious leaders also condemned defoliation by invoking environmentalist ideas about the inherent worth of nature, emphasizing Agent Orange's moral transformation. In 1967, the *NYT* reported that the National Council of Churches criticized defoliation and America's tendency to "either 'use' or disregard other Asian countries in the pursuit of war."[67] Not only did church authorities leverage environmentalist idea about nature's intrinsic worth to argue against the Vietnam War, but major newspapers reported these arguments, spreading environmentalist, antiwar ideas across the country. The *NYT* later reported that *Catholic Magazine* also called the Vietnam War immoral because of "the use of napalm, and the practice of defoliation and what it calls the arbitrary relocating of people in violation of the 'bodily integrity,'" equating the violation of South Vietnamese peoples' wellbeing through the strategic hamlet program with the environmental destruction from defoliation.[68] The adoption of ecological thinking by religious authorities further moralized the defoliation issue, and national papers publicized their message, spreading environmentalist ideas to a predominantly Christian America.

This recharacterization of containment technology into immoral weaponry became exemplified by the wave of protests against the Dow Chemical Corporation in 1967. Dow manufactured Napalm, a flammable gel once used alongside Agent Orange for the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. Americans now condemned the gel after newspapers described how it "not only burns [buildings] but consum[es] oxygen so rapidly that the people inside may be asphyxiated even when untouched by flame."[69] More than 300 college campuses protested Dow's recruiting efforts, condemning the company's role in producing what students increasingly viewed as a weapon of mass destruction.[70] The *Washington* Post reported that a protestor hoped "the words 'burning children alive' appear in your article,'" illustrating public perception of napalm as a weapon of mass destruction.[71] Highlighting these critiques of the technology itself, an *NYT*

February 11, 1968.

67 "Church Criticizes Policy on Vietnam," *The New York Times*, June 25, 1967.

68 George Dugan, "Catholic Magazine Calls Vietnam War Immoral," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1967.

69 Jack Raymond, "U.S. Fliers Using Napalm in Raids: Air Strikes in North Vietnam Aided by Fire Bombs," *The New York Times*, March 20, 1965.

70 "Making of Napalm Protested by 300," *The Washington Post,* November 12, 1966.

71 William Clopton Jr., "War Protesters Picket Napalm Maker's Office," *The Washington Post,* March 10, 1967.

article wrote that “antiwar groups feel that the use of napalm is immoral and link it with their feelings that the Vietnam war is immoral.”[72] Napalm, once embraced as a tool for containment, was being recast as a symbol of American military violence. This condemnation recharacterized chemical weapons as immoral, a change that would naturally extend to the other major chemical weapon used by the American military: herbicides.

The Dow Protests were one of thousands of countercultural protests that occurred in America during the 1960s and 1970s. Environmentalism fused with the broader countercultural movements of the 1960s and 70s to further characterize defoliation as violence towards nature. Antiwar, Civil Rights, and environmental activists linked ecological destruction in America to injustices committed against marginalized communities abroad.[73] The United States Information Agency reported that “the Cambodian action, the Kent State deaths, the university strikes and demonstrations... led to… students becoming outspokenly anti-government,” positioning American actions in Southeast Asia as a prominent cause of growing public government distrust.[74] Protesters carried signs that proclaimed, “Pollution: Brought to you by the same folks that brought you Vietnam.”[75] One *NYT* writer posited that “Americans may be remembered in Indochina more for what they did to the mangrove swamps than for what they did for democracy,” exemplifying a breakdown in the previous public containment consensus.[76] The article called the ecological effects of defoliation “chemical wounds,” highlighting the violent nature of Agent Orange and comparing them to protest suppression tactics used in America.[77] Another article lamented the tradeoff between “X American lives for the long term ecological effects on their forests, their lands, their crops, their people,” illustrating a new value system which equated human life to environmental health.[78] Unable to withstand the growing criticism, on April 15, 1970, Nixon terminated Operation Ranch Hand,

---

72 Anthony Ripley, “Napalm Protests Worrying Dow, Though Company Is Unhurt: Grandson Is President the Company Position Ingredients of Napalm 500 Demonstrations,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 1967.

73 Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide,18-19*.

74 Micheal P. Canning, “Memorandum from the Chairman of the USIA Young Officer’s Policy Panel (Canning) to the Director of the United States Information Agency (Shakespeare),” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1917–1972, Volume VIII, Public Diplomacy, 1969–1972,* May 15, 1970.

75 Image in Sarah Pruitt, “How the First Earth Day Was Born From 1960s Counterculture,” HISTORY, April 21, 2020, .

76 Edward P. Morgan, “Effects of Vietnam Defoliation: The Chemical Wounds,” *The Washington Post,* March 3, 1971.

77 Morgan, “Effects of Vietnam Defoliation.”

78 Grace Aviles, “Letters to the Editor: Defoliation ‘Failure,’” *The Washington Post*, January 6, 1971.

despite military commanders' objections.[79]

Yet the controversy was far from over. In a culmination of these anti-defoliation sentiments, some Americans redefined defoliation as "ecocide." American plant physiologist Arthur Galston, a key figure in spreading scientific dissent against Agent Orange, testified at a 1970 "War Crimes and the American Conscience" conference that:

> "As a result of the Nuremburg Trials, we justly condemned the willful destruction of an entire people and its culture, calling this crime against humanity a genocide. It seems to me that the willful and permanent destruction of an environment in which a people can live in a manner of their own choosing ought similarly to be considered as a crime against humanity, to be designated by the term *ecocide*."[80]

This testimony reveals a complete recharacterization of Agent Orange from a neutral containment technology to a weapon of mass destruction equivalent to genocide. Galston's definition relied on the environmentalist idea that harm to nature was inherently wrong — equivalent to human harm — which would not have resonated with American audiences a decade prior. It also represents Americans' abandonment of containment-era policies. America was not spreading freedom to Vietnam, instead, they committed crimes against its people and environment equivalent to the Nazis' actions during the Holocaust.

The term "ecocide" was adopted in newspapers, illustrating the permeation of environmentalist concepts of harm towards the environment. Reporting on Galston's remarks at the conference, the *NYT* wrote "a plea to ban ecocide" on the ground that "the U.S. has a moral responsibility to reconsider defoliaiton in view of ecological disruption."[81] The *LA Times* reported discussions of "ecological warfare methods, or 'ecocide,'" at the first U.N. Conference on the Environment in 1972, reflecting Agent Orange's role in engendering institutional acceptance of environmentalist advocacy.[82] Another *NYT* article wrote that "this modern program, for which the U.S. government must be held accountable, has a destructive influence on the social fabric of Indochinese life as did the ecocide…of the American West upon the American Indian," illustrating an instance in which Americans retroactively applied this new idea of ecocide to previous instances of U.S. imperialism.[83] Americans now not only viewed defoliation as violence, they used this instance of environmental harm as a framework

79 Martini, *Agent Orange, 99*.

80 Arthur Galston in Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide, 19*.

81 "And a Plea to Ban 'Ecocide,'" *The New York Times*, February 26, 1970.

82 "Chinese Walk Out of Ecology Talks in Protest on Vietnam," *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 1972.

83 Stuart Auerbach, "Wide Devastation by Big Bomb Told: Damage to Indochina Ecology from Big U.S. Bomb Deplored," *The Washington Post,* December 28, 1971.

to analyze previous American military actions. The environmental destruction wrought by Agent Orange galvanized the creation of a new moral framework that understood harm to nature as wrong.

Conclusion

The story of Agent Orange was shaped by the environmentalist movement. Americans once viewed defoliation as an innovative technology to contain communism in Southeast Asia, reflecting Cold War faith in scientific expertise. However, as the environmentalist movement grew alongside the Vietnam War, Americans were unable to reconcile images of desolated forests and poisoned villages with this technocratic attitude. The environmentalist and antiwar movements fused around Agent Orange, reframing what had once seemed like a technological innovation as a weapon of mass destruction. Changes in attitudes toward herbicidal warfare were caused by revisions to American's fundamental assumptions about the intrinsic worth of the world around them. Defoliation became "ecocide," a comparison to the Nazis' atrocities in World War II, and Agent Orange transformed into a symbol of American violence.

Margaret Mead is an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, where she studies history and economics. Her academic interests include environmental history, and she is currently working on a senior honors thesis about medieval Greenland.

Transitional Justice After Argentina's "Dirty War"

Elsa Mitchell
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

Abstract: This paper examines Argentina's struggle for transitional justice after the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, assessing why legal institutions failed to deliver accountability for the thousands killed or disappeared during the "Dirty War." Despite the 1985 Trial of the Juntas, structural weaknesses, amnesty laws, and jurisdictional conflicts prevented the judiciary from establishing lasting justice. In response, civil society organizations developed truth commissions, memorialization practices, and *escraches* (direct-action protest denouncing a person's wrongdoing) to recover identity, expose impunity, and sustain public pressure for accountability. Drawing on legal analysis, ethnographic testimony, sociological research, and political history, this interdisciplinary study argues that these non-judicial mechanisms became the primary drivers of Argentina's post-2000 transitional justice landscape. The findings show that legal justice alone could not address the magnitude of state terror, and that durable reconciliation required a sustained partnership between judicial reform and collective civil society memory efforts.

Introduction

"To guarantee the security of the state, all necessary people will die." This statement by Lieutenant General Jorge Rafael Videla warned Argentines of a future defined by state-imposed terror. Months after making this promise to a journalist, Videla led a military coup against President Isabel Perón, becoming the 47th President of Argentina.[1] In 1976, Videla concentrated the executive, legislative, and judiciary power in the hands of the military junta, or "group."[2] The junta's agenda was to purge the "subversives" deemed incompatible with Videla's vision for the state. They institutionalized the purge through a clandestine campaign known as the "Dirty War," under which thousands were killed, tortured, or "disappeared," usually kidnapped and never seen again.[3] The regime stripped the disappeared of their identities, covertly disposed of tortured bodies,

1 Rita Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Struggle against Impunity in Argentina," *Meridians* 3, no. 1 (2002): 19.

2 Frederick Snyder, "State of Siege and Rule of Law in Argentina: The Politics and Rhetoric of Vindication," *University of Miami Inter-American. Law Review* 15, no. 3 (1984): 509.

3 Amnesty International, *Military Juntas and Human Rights: Report of the Trial*

and threw living detainees into the sea on "death flights."[4] During the Dirty War, relatives of the disappeared and human rights organizations took to the front lines. These groups became the most outspoken forces against Videla's regime of terror, despite the fact that judicial stagnation and the struggle of fighting against the state hindered a long-lasting transitional justice.[5] Transitional justice, a collection of measures a society implements to prevent the recurrence of abuses and repair the damage those abuses cause, serves as the primary framework to assess the effectiveness of reconciliation among Argentines.[6]

The fight for transitional justice after the Dirty War inadvertently revealed the limitations of legal justice in addressing mass atrocity. Yet it also demonstrated how non-judicial remembrance methods play a vital role in fostering closure, collective memory, and reconciliation. This paper examines the limitations of the legal justice system in prosecuting offenders, the resilience of Argentines, and the current state of transitional justice. It engages with reports on trials, interviews with victims' families, legal frameworks, and various ethnographic, sociological, and legal literature. Beyond the existing literature, the paper also investigates the effectiveness of judicial transitional justice mechanisms by analyzing trial outcomes and evaluates non-judicial mechanisms by examining their role in shaping memory, identity, and institutional reforms aimed at preventing another "Dirty War." The overlap of judicial and non-judicial transitional justice methods often results in them acting as competing forces in the complex process of achieving transitional justice from 1983 to 2000. The year 2000 marked the start of a new, post-transitional justice era characterized by a closer connection among the government, the judiciary, and civil society.

Historiography

Argentina's Dirty War and the role of transitional justice in fostering reconciliation call for an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses diverse perspectives and analyses. However, many authors addressing this topic focus on only one or two approaches — legal or ethnographic — resulting in a less nuanced and comprehensive analysis. Scholars incorporating a legal approach in studying transitional justice document trials and review amendments to explain how various legal interpretations influenced arguments made by the defense or prosecutors during the trials, and how the trials impacted the transitional justice process. The legal approach often offers overly technical accounts that are difficult to sift through, provide limited information about the individuals affected by the Dirty War, and focus solely on the wording of laws and frameworks.

---

of the Former Junta Members, 1985 (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1987), 4.

4 Ulrike Capdepón, and Rosario Layús, eds., *The Impact of Human Rights Prosecutions: Insights from European, Latin American, and African Post-Conflict Societies* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021), 107.

5 "Interview with Estela Barnes de Carlotto: President of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo,"*International Review of the Red Cross* 99, no. 2 (2017): 487–495.

6 "Four Decades of the Decree that Set in Motion the Famous Trial of the Juntas in Argentina," *CE Noticias Financieras*, 2023.

Non-judicial methods of transitional justice can include ethnographic, political, or sociological approaches. Ethnographers rely on interviews rather than legal or political sources and combine archival research with fieldwork to gather quotes, primary sources, and personal narratives into a cohesive story. The final category of transitional justice literature includes sociological theories and political research, highlighting the roles of the judiciary and the executive branches in implementing transitional justice mechanisms. Authors also examine attitudes towards reconciliation and justice through a sociological and political lens to elucidate theories of human rights and political violence. These approaches usually convey a singular narrative: either the legal historian focusing on a single interpretation of the law, the ethnographer using a single individual account to paint a broader picture of transitional justice, or the socio-political approach failing to connect theory with practice. Bridging the gap between the ethnographic, legal, sociological, and political literatures is crucial to developing a comprehensive, holistic approach to transitional justice that integrates law, individuals, and theory.

Drawing on legal histories and theories explains how laws helped or hindered the transitional justice process. Authors of legal reviews, law journals, and books on the legal frameworks governing criminal prosecution and the Argentine Constitution approach the topic with diverse methods and opinions. Some legal sources construct a single Argentine legal story, examining the trials through the lens of national law.[7] In contrast, others, such as Rosario Layus, look at failures of international law and legal pluralism and engage with multiple interpretations of laws and the Constitution.[8] They demonstrate how actors like Videla weaponized legal and Constitutional privileges. Some legal works, including Snyders's "State of Siege", appeared shortly after the end of Videla's dictatorship, thus before the trials and transitional justice processes began. Therefore, these approaches have less retrospective bias than those written decades after the state of siege but remain less informative about the effect of the trials and their role in the transitional justice process.[9]

Some frameworks demonstrate how the Argentine judiciary utilized legal knowledge and philosophy to address prosecutions.[10] Many discussions on transitional justice focus on the limitations of international law, noting that its requirements may cause national courts to interpret laws differently.[11] Some scholars criticize how international law is implemented in Argentina, arguing that a dysfunctional judiciary cannot enforce it in domestic prosecutions.

7 "Four Decades of the Decree," *CE Noticias Financieras*.

8 Rosario Layús, *The Reparative Effects on Human Rights Trials: Lessons from Argentina* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

9 Snyder, "State of Siege and Rule of Law in Argentina," 509.

10 Ezequiel González Ocantos, "Persuade Them or Oust Them: Crafting Judicial Change and Transitional Justice in Argentina," *Comparative Politics* 46, no. 4 (2014): 479–498.

11 Margarita K O'Donnell, "New Dirty War Judgments in Argentina: National Courts and Domestic Prosecutions of International Human Rights Violations," *New York University Law Review* 84, no. 1 (2009): 333–374.

Other authors see transitional justice as hindering legal systems, especially in addressing global human rights.[12] Indeed, many debates on transitional justice highlight the limits of international law, with Margarita O'Donnell noting that the demands of international law may lead national courts to interpret laws differently, without fully considering all aspects of abuses.[13] Hector Olásolo, among other scholars, strongly contends that international criminal law and transitional justice approaches are incompatible and therefore cannot effectively address and judge authoritarian regimes like Videla's.[14]

To combine ethnographic and sociological perspectives, this paper examines several interviews with activists and family members of victims and offers an analysis of the memorialization and remembrance practices employed by Argentines following the Dirty War. Rita Arditti, an Argentine activist, argues that by speaking out and refusing to be complacent, families of the victims of the Dirty War keep their memories alive.[15] Other authors similarly use interviews to explore perspectives on torture and human rights, analyzing their relationship to memory work and transitional justice. Natasha Zaretsky further enriches the discourse on memorialization and ethnographic research through her long-term fieldwork in Buenos Aires with survivors of the Dirty War. She argues that personal agency is crucial in confronting political violence and impunity.[16] Using these interviews and testimonies highlights how memories can be weaponized and used as evidence in both judicial and non-judicial processes to support specific narratives of justice and remembrance. Notably, these ethnographies will be essential when analyzing non-judicial transitional justice efforts.

However, some ethnographies include different perspectives on memorialization, emphasizing the successes and challenges of organizations and families in their effort to pursue justice and seek truth. For instance, Francesca Lessa discussed archival documents and their limitations in trials in Argentina in the late 2010s.[17] Similarly, Jill Stockwell studied two groups of women with opposing ideologies and their accounts of affective memory after the Dirty War, noting that the constraints of oral testimonies—due to trauma and emotions linked to the period of terror—make them unreliable in a court of law.[18] Through fieldwork and an examination of anthropological literature on justice, scholars examine how human rights groups and activists pursue justice, highlighting the

12 Naomi Roht-Arriaza, *The Pinochet Effect: Transnational Justice in the Age of Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

13 O'Donnell, "New Dirty War Judgements in Argentina."

14 Hector Olásolo, *Transitional Justice: Transnational Criminal Organizations and Transitional Justice* (Boston: Brill, 2018).

15 Arditti, "The Grandmothers," 19–41.

16 Natasha Zaretsky, *Acts of Repair: Justice, Truth and the Politics of Memory in Argentina* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021).

17 Francesca Lessa, "Remnants of Truth: The Role of Archives in Human Rights Trials for Operation Condor," *Latin American Research Review* 56, no. 1 (2021): 183–199.

18 Jill Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm: Women's Affective Memories in Post-Dictatorial Argentina* (Cham: Springer, 2014).

flaws and merits of nonjudicial processes undertaken by human rights organizations and other parties in attempts to achieve transitional justice.[19]

The final category of scholarship on transitional justice literature encompasses sociological and political history, which prioritizes the roles of actors and the state as institutions in tracing the history of transitional justice and the trials in these contexts. Authors Lorena Balardini and Ulrike Capdepón focus on the trajectories and roles of governments under various leaders in pursuing transitional justice;[20] they examine civil society's responses and capacities to advance the process.[21] Similarly, the context of the trials in Emilio Crenzel and Coreen Davis's historical-sociological books covers the role of the state-institutionalized system of terror;[22] they address the legal history and the merits and failures of the trials.[23] Other social analyses include Mark Osiel's study of the leaders of the Dirty War squads, which uses a case study and draws on Hannah Arendt's ideas of criminal psychology and the bureaucratization of mass atrocity to examine the trials.[24]

The wide variety of research about transitional justice reflects the process's ongoing nature. Some older literature focuses on the legal implications of amnesty laws and trials, rather than on more recent sociological discussions of transitional justice that connect causation with conflict prevention and individual agency. With a renewed focus on alternative forms of justice, a rise in ethnographic work—such as interviews and fieldwork on memorialization efforts—was accompanied by a decline in discussions of legal frameworks and judicial processes. The shift primarily stemmed from disillusionment with the amnesty laws enacted by Alfonsín, Argentina's democratically elected president in 1983, which impeded justice and reconciliation and granted immunity to perpetrators.

This paper bridges the gaps between ethnographic and legal discussions to better understand how Argentines viewed the trials. The research examines whether these trials served as instruments of reconciliation, enabling individual justice against junta perpetrators and alleged criminals, or as instruments of

---

19 Noa Vaisman, "Variations on Justice: Argentina's Pre- and Post-Transitional Justice and the Justice to Come," *Ethnos* 82, no. 2 (2017): 366-388.

20 Lorena Balardini, "Argentina: Regional Protagonist of Transitional Justice," In *Transitional Justice*

in Latin America: The Uneven Road from Impunity towards Accountability, edited by Francesca Lessa and Leigh A. Payne (London: Routledge, 2016).

21 Capdepón and Layús, *The Impact of Human Rights Prosecutions,* 107.

22 Emilio Crenzel, "Revisiting the Origins of Argentina's Military Junta Trial: Political, Moral, and Legal Dilemmas of a Transitional Justice Strategy," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Latino-Américaines et Caraïbes* 42 (2017): 144–164.

23 Coreen Davis, *State Terrorism and Post-Transitional Justice in Argentina: An Analysis of Mega Cause I Trial* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

24 Mark Osiel, *Mass Atrocity, Ordinary Evil, and Hannah Arendt: Criminal Consciousness in Argentina's Dirty War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

impunity, granting junta members immunity for their crimes. Reemphasizing and returning to the legal frameworks that defined the trials may offer insight into the prosecution's failures and suggest future reforms to address domestic and international law. Incorporating nonjudicial memorializing efforts, such as ethnographies that highlight transitional justice, and situating them within a judicial context can diminish the gap between the judiciary and the public. Further, incorporating sociological and political perspectives broadens the scope of analysis, providing a holistic review of the transitional justice process in Argentina.

The Trial of the Junta*s*: Judicial Transitional Justice

In his first major public speech after seizing the presidency, Videla explained the junta's primary motivation as safeguarding the nation's "highest interests." His speech drew on his past rhetoric about the reorganization of Argentine society, claiming to abide by the constitution and declaring the armed forces the state's foremost institutional body.[25] Under Article 23 of the Argentine Constitution, the basic principles of the state of siege provided that in "the event of domestic disorder…territory which is in turmoil shall be declared in a state of siege, and the constitutional guarantees shall be suspended therein." However, this suspension stated, "the President of the Republic shall not pronounce judgment or apply penalties on his own."[26] Videla chose to ignore certain aspects of this provision, instead implementing his interpretation of the Argentine Constitution—a preview of future constitutional misinterpretations.

With the end of the military dictatorship and President Alfonsín in power, human rights organizations and victims' families increased demands for courts to prosecute the juntas for their crimes.[27] The government of Alfonsín faced an unprecedented responsibility in investigating and prosecuting its own armed forces for their alleged human rights abuses.[28] Beginning in 1985, the Trial of the Juntas played an essential role in continuing the conversation around domestic accountability, serving as the principal judicial form of transitional justice. However, scholars and historians highly contest the success of the trials in the transitional justice process.[29]

The trials, unique in modern Latin American history, served as a case against government figures who presided over gross human rights violations. They were the culmination of intense efforts by human rights organizations and victims to uncover the truth about the fates of the "disappeared."[30] While effective prosecution in the trials of the late 1980s through the early 1990s provided some sense of reconciliation and closure amongst the victims' families, they were not effective in establishing a lasting and immediate sense of transitional justice due to their fundamental structural flaws, the subsequent amnesty laws,

25 Snyder, "State of Siege," 508.

26 Constitution of the Argentine Nation, 1853, http://www.biblioteca.jus.gov.ar/Argentina-Constitution.pdf.

27 Amnesty International, *Military Juntas,* 6.

28 Mignone et al., "Dictatorship on Trial," 119.

29 Davis, *State Terrorism*, 15.

30 Amnesty International, *Military Juntas*, 1.

and jurisdictional debates.

One month before the dictatorship ended, the junta published an amnesty law, the Law of National Pacification, which pardoned actors who engaged in politically motivated kidnappings, torture, and murder, while blocking further investigations into the thousands of "disappeared" Argentine subversives. Two years after Alfonsín's election in 1983, the National Commission of the Disappeared (CONADEP) presented documentation of the military junta's actions in a comprehensive report titled *Nunca Más*, or *Never Again*, and trials began.[31] CONADEP's process of developing the report involved interviewing thousands of witnesses, including former prisoners and their relatives, as well as inspecting former torture and detention centers where the kidnapped "disappeared" were held.[32] The report established a solid ground of evidence through these testimonies, which were utilized in the Trial of the Juntas. However, due to the other constraints of the judiciary, the work of CONADEP as a facilitator of judicial transitional justice, mandated to uncover the fate of the 30,000 disappeared Argentines, proved largely unsuccessful in a legal sense.[33]

Structural Failures and Interpretations of the Law

The loose constitutional interpretation that permitted the state of siege and the rise of Videla established a pattern of subsequent manipulation of legal frameworks, illustrating structural failures and interpretations that emphasized impunity over accountability. These failures exemplified how those in positions of power manipulate legal institutions and processes to fit their objectives.[34] The trial's defining legal framework, which overwhelmingly favored the military defendants, emerged from three sources, all of which ultimately presented a complex case for the prosecution. Within the trial structure, the Argentine Constitution provided guiding norms and guarantees, the Penal Code defined criminal acts and justifications, and the Code of Military Justice permitted the involvement of military personnel in trials. Under the guise of legality and supporting frameworks, the junta's defense lawyers exploited these sources. They judicially interpreted them to justify the junta's actions under constitutional, criminal, and military law.[35]

The initial debate surrounding the trials centered on which court had jurisdiction to try the junta members. The human rights community and families of victims demanded the prosecution of the junta by civilian courts due to their more impartial stance.[36] Instead, jurisdiction was vested in the military tribunals, creating a severe constitutional conflict of interest. [37] This decision came from the Argentine Code of Military Justice, which laid out a similar provision as the Argentine Constitution's Article 18. This article essentially functioned as a safe-

31 Amnesty International, *Military Juntas,* 6
32 Amnesty International, *Military Juntas*, 9.
33 Vaisman, "Variations on Justice," 371.
34 Snyder, "State of Siege," 505–506.
35 Amnesty International, *Military Juntas,* 15.
36 Mignone, "Dictatorship on Trial," 124.
37 Mignone, "Dictatorship on Trial," 132.

guard where defendants were to be tried in military court, which was determined to be the military's "natural judge."[38] However, the Argentine Congress passed Law 23.049 in 1984, which called for a civilian court, rather than the military, to deal with future offenses against the Penal Code. This ruling further complicated the process by stipulating that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces could dissolve any penal offenses committed prior to the enactment of Law 23.049. It permitted those with closed cases determining guilt to issue appeals, severely limiting the scope of military justice and undoing progress made in prosecuting the junta members.[39]

Another structural failure emerged in the Penal Code, which describes crimes and appropriate sentencing in Argentina. While the Code referred to specific crimes and offenses committed by the junta, including murder, torture, involuntary servitude, concealment of offenders, robbery, and falsification of public documents, some charges were circumvented.[40] One charge, "elimination," which included the "disappearances" of the subversives, was unregulated and challenging to understand and prosecute. This loophole left courts legally unable to address one of the most pervasive crimes committed by the military dictatorship. However, even with the major gap in prosecution, the court did decide that the acts of illegal detention, torture, homicide, and robbery were not means to achieve a "just end," and did not comply with the three defenses of the Penal Code: necessity, execution of justice, and self-defense.[41]

Amnesty Laws

The "Full Stop" and "Due Obedience" amnesty laws and presidential pardons passed in the late 1980s-1990s restricted the scope of further prosecutions and slowed the transitional justice process. Under military pressure, Alfonsín passed the Punto Final (Full Stop) Law, creating a 60-day deadline to present new formal charges against perpetrators. The Obediencia Debida (Due Obedience) law similarly protected the junta members by creating a defense for the officers, presuming they acted under unquestionable orders.[42] Under this law, prosecution of lower and mid-level military personnel decreased, while top generals and admirals became the main targets as the masterminds behind the operations, despite many of them not actively participating in torture and murder.[43] The Due Obedience thesis essentially created a "one-dimensional characterization of the perpetrators," defining them as unthinking, mechanical robots prepared to carry out any order, at any time, for their superiors.[44] Due to these laws, many individuals directly responsible for Argentine deaths could not face trial.

Both laws resulted in a significant backpedaling of prosecutions,

38 Amnesty International, *Military Juntas*, 10.
39 Amnesty International, *Military Juntas*, 11.
40 Amnesty International, *Military Juntas*, 40.
41 Amnesty International, *Military Juntas,* 70.
42 "Four Decades of the Decree," *CE Noticias Financieras*.
43 Osiel, *Mass Atrocity*, 18–20.
44 Crenzel, "Revisiting the Origins," 153.

undermining the independence and prestige of the new Argentine Court. Over 430 existing defendants' charges were dropped following the enactment of the amnesty laws, and the trials that had relied on CONADEP's reporting were annulled.[45] Thus, the two impunity laws erased steps toward transitional justice by halting the prosecution of the men who killed, tortured, or kidnapped Argentines.

Beyond amnesty laws, presidential pardons served as another mechanism of impunity, hindering the transitional justice process. Alfonsín's successor, President Carlos Saúl Menem, campaigned on a platform of judicial reform, but then pardoned the few people who had actually been convicted and under indictment; he further declared that "the subject of human rights violations during the dictatorship was now closed."[46] Despite 80% of Argentines disagreeing with the pardons, Menem proceeded, declaring the pardons "essential for national reconciliation," so that the country could shift its focus away from the painful destruction of the past and instead concentrate on a more prosperous future.[47] Further, Menem packed the Supreme Court with pro-immunity justices and appointed allies of the anti-transitional justice campaign to the highest criminal court in Argentina.[48] Between the two amnesty laws and Menem's Pardon decree, only ten people remained in prison for the crimes committed during Videla's dictatorship.[49] The Argentine Court's approval of Alfonsín's amnesty laws and Menem's Presidential pardons "confirmed its partiality to many Argentines," slashing the court's legitimacy and the judiciary as an effective driver of transitional justice.[50]

Failures of Legal Pluralism and Jurisdictional Debates

A significant line of defense for the juntas emerged from the jurisdictional issues concerning the "competence" of civilian courts to judge what many saw as a military matter, further stagnating the trials, as many families of victims and human rights organizations patiently waited for justice.[51] The issue of legal pluralism—where multiple legal systems coexist and individuals can choose among them—created challenges for courts in deciding whether to apply domestic or international law when trying the military juntas.[52] The debate over which court should try the junta and the conflict between national and international law thus exacerbated the already complex issues created by the trial's structure and the amnesty laws, thereby slowing the transitional justice process.

National prosecutions of human rights violations prove more problematic to undertake successfully, for when international law is applied domestically

45 Balardini, "Argentina: Regional Protagonist," 58.
46 Roht-Arriaza, *The Pinochet Effect*, 97–98.
47 Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo," 24.
48 Ocantos, "Persuade Them or Oust Them," 485.
49 Olásolo, *Transitional Justice*, 63.
50 Arriaza, *The Pinochet Effect*, 97.
51 Osiel, *Mass Atrocity*, 16.
52 Keebet von Benda-Beckmann and Bertram Turner, "Legal Pluralism, Social Theory, and the State," *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 50, no. 3 (2018): 262, https://doi.org/10.1080/07329113.2018.1532674.

by national courts, it is "imbued with values shaped by local factors."[53] Although international law is intended to take precedence over national law, establishing domestic duties and standards of criminal procedure, local non-state actors—including those still in positions of power facing prosecution for war crimes or other human rights violations—often exert significant influence.[54] With immunity granted to junta members, national law took precedence over international norms and domestic law within the context of legal pluralism in the Argentine judiciary. In Argentina, international law and its associated soft law standards were fragmented and lacked external enforcement mechanisms.[55]

The large number of Argentines involved in top decision-making, along with the public's complicity—including that of judges and prosecutors—highlighted the limited effectiveness of international law enforcement in a resistant domestic environment. [56] Domestic groups using international law for transitional justice relied on its authority to standardize human rights and criminal prohibitions. However, international law failed to accelerate sentencing and prosecution, as it could not compete with military and national courts.[57]

On December 9, 1985, the Federal Court of Appeals of Buenos Aires convicted five of the nine members of the three juntas as indirect perpetrators of illegal detention, torture, and homicide.[58] Jorge Videla received a sentence of life imprisonment, while other top leaders received several years. Although five members of the junta were prosecuted, the 1980s Trial of the Junta showed that the legal process, initially seen as a "quasi-autonomous mechanism" challenging the executive, ironically ended up serving as "an unsuspecting accomplice" to the junta. Initially, only nine junta members were tried, and just five received relatively short sentences—except for Videla. As a result, hundreds of junta members responsible for Argentine civilian deaths were granted impunity for their actions.[59]

The task of persuading certain judicial actors to convict the junta for their crimes, along with the roles of witness testimonies and evidence, proved more effective in subsequent post-transitional justice trials as civil society gained momentum and the judicial aspects worked more effectively alongside the non-judicial aspects. The initial Trial of the Juntas resulted in families of victims waiting decades for closure, demonstrating the judiciary's failures in promoting transitional justice and repairing the state's abuses. Despite their limitations, 1985 marked a turning point in Argentina's history, as it was the first time military members were brought to trial.[60]

---

53 "Four Decades of the Decree," *CE Noticias Financieras*.
54 "Four Decades of the Decree," *CE Noticias Financieras*.
55 Olásolo, *Transitional Justice*, 155.
56 Olásolo, *Transitional Justice*, 72–73.
57 "Four Decades of the Decree," *CE Noticias Financieras*.
58 Olásolo, *Transitional Justice*, 63.
59 Snyder, "State of Siege," 518.
60 Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo," 24.

Recognizing and Memorializing Victims: Non-Judicial Transitional Justice

The era of impunity in the 1990s reinforced nonjudicial transitional justice mechanisms and underscored the significance of memory and advocacy for human rights groups.[61] During and after the Trial of the Juntas and the failures of judicial transitional justice, truth-seeking commissions, human rights organizations such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and movements such as the *escrache* turned to memory work to advocate for justice and truth. As new presidents took office, memorialization and organizational efforts aligned with or opposed the administration's policies and perspectives on amnesty and human rights. Therefore, memory —a "common language" through which individuals can share traumatic experiences —became a "dominant form of belonging in Argentina."[62]

Truth-Seeking Commissions

CONADEP's *Nunca Más*, regarded as the "most successful effort of the decade anywhere in Latin America…to hold accountable those who committed gross abuses of human rights," was the primary truth commission report that influenced the direction of transitional justice.[63] *Nunca Más* declared that the events of the "Dirty War" exceeded criminal offenses, regarding the methods used by the junta as crimes against humanity.[64] The report recorded thousands of cases of abductions, detentions, torture, and other horrific acts performed by members of the military, despite the Argentine military purposefully hindering their investigations. The narrative tone and the intense detail of the victims' testimonies established a model for future truth commissions in Argentina and beyond, confirming the continued relevance of *Nunca Más* as a human rights text and its role as a "new public truth" regarding the crimes committed by the military government.[65] The captivating individual perspectives offered by truth commissions further reveal the value of collective memory. Together, collective memorialization enables a shared narrative and provides victims and their families with a space and a community to grieve, reflect, and advocate for change – all essential components of the transitional justice process.[66]

While interviewing, investigating, and attempting to uncover the truth of the fate of victims of the Dirty War, military members gave CONADEP the same excuses for their crimes: that they were engaged in a "dirty war" against subversives to protect Argentina's "values," and that they were "following orders." To further reduce the credibility of CONADEP's investigations, the

61 Zaretsky, *Acts of Repair,* 70.

62 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm*, 4.

63 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm*, 32.

64 National Commission on the Disappearances of Persons, *Nunca Más*, trans. Writers and Scholars International Ltd (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1986), 2.

65 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm*, 31.

66 Audrey R. Chapman, "Truth Finding in the Transitional Justice Process," in *Assessing the Impact of Transitional Justice: Challenges for Empirical Research*, ed. Hugo van der Merwe, Vesselin Popovski, and Michael P. Scharf (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 92.

military members accused CONADEP of “hindering national reconciliation” by “stirring up” past grievances and resentment.[67] Despite these obstacles, under the presidency of Alfonsín, CONADEP successfully documented and presented its report to the judiciary as primary evidence to convict military personnel during the 1980s trials.[68]

With the limited judicial success of *Nunca Más* in presenting the case for the victims of the Dirty War, its primary achievement lies in its symbolic construction of historical memory and as a vehicle for collective testimony about the past.[69] CONADEP’s publication also pushed for reparations for the victims, a restoration of labor rights for those blacklisted during the dictatorship, and the annulment of other oppressive administrative actions.[70] As a truth commission, CONADEP’s work further exposed the various lies and cover-ups that the junta offered by revealing locations of over 600 detention centers across the country, as well as captured testimonies from victims of the junta documenting their experiences as “disappeared.”[71]

The emotional, often graphic testimonies depict scenes of torture and abduction. One man, Dr. Norberto Liwsky, who “disappeared” from Buenos Aires in 1978, described the “vivid and terrifying memory” of his kidnapping and torture, where he “wished with all [his] heart that they would kill [him] as soon as possible.”[72] Members of the Argentine public could not easily ignore the intensity of the testimonies, as reported in the widely circulated weekly *El Diario del Juicio*.[73] The testimonies damaged public confidence in the judiciary, as in the mid-1990s, 89% of Argentines had little or no trust in the courts to handle the trials.[74]

Despite the numerous detailed accounts presented in *Nunca Más*, these charges proved difficult to sustain in court due to the judicial system’s structural failures and its inability to consider emotional, personal accounts legitimate.[75] Instead, *Nunca Más* proved more influential in drawing international attention to the Dirty War, mobilizing dozens of human rights organizations, and highlighting the judiciary’s failures. Current truth commission research and

67 CONADEP, *Nunca Más*, 5.

68 Barbara Sutton, “Collective Memory and the Language of Human Rights: Attitudes toward Torture in Contemporary Argentina,” *Latin American Perspectives* 42, no. 3 (2015): 74.

69 Balardini, “Argentina: Regional Protagonist,” 57.

70 Balardini, “Argentina: Regional Protagonist,” 56.

71 Zaretsky, *Acts of Repair*, 50.

72 CONADEP, *Nunca Más*, 23.

73 Luis Roniger, “Argentina’s Dictatorship and the Post-Dictatorial Policies of Transitional Justice: The Looking Glass of El Diario del Juicio,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 60 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1177/00220094251322190.

74 Pearce Edwards, Jennifer Gandhi, and Daniel Grasse, “Fixing the Past: The Effects of Human Rights trials on Political Attitudes in Argentina,” *British Journal of Political Science* 55 (2025): 7. https://doi.org/10.1017/S00071234240002.

75 CONADEP, *Nunca Más*, 26.

conflict resolution theory categorize storytelling and oral testimony as effective methods of memorialization, as they heal both individual and collective psychological issues arising from traumatic events.[76] The narrative style of the oral testimonies underscores *Nunca Más* as a significant form of remembrance while re-establishing the humanity of the disappeared, restoring their identities, and overcoming the "secrecy" behind their fate.[77] *Nunca Más* became a tool for transitional justice, used as evidence in the 1985 trials and widely incorporated throughout civil society, including in Argentine school curricula to illustrate an "official truth" after the chaos of the Dirty War.[78]

Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo

Due to their often-futile efforts in receiving judicial accountability, justice, and answers, relatives and friends of the disappeared instead organized amongst themselves, united by their shared pain and refusal to capitulate to complacency and silence.[79] One of the most notable organizations formed to seek justice, Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), emerged in 1977 as a small group of women composed of traditional housewives who had participated little in public action until the Dirty War.[80] Hebe de Bonafini, the president of Las Madres, noted that the mothers shared a "tragic expression" but found strength in their traumatic experiences. The group formed after mothers began encountering one another in various settings, such as the police department and the Ministry of the Interior and demanded answers. Banded together under grief and concern for their loved ones, they realized that "working together was more effective than working individually."[81] Las Madres expanded their membership, with 300-400 women meeting in front of the Casa Rosada in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, wearing white headscarves and marching for their lost relatives every Thursday.[82]

Las Madres was officially organized in 1979, entering an arena of politics and confrontation previously reserved for men, thereby challenging the paradigm of "motherhood as a private enclave."[83] United by "the tragedy [and]

---

76 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm,* 4.

77 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm,* 31.

78 Ellen van Damme, "35th Anniversary of "Nunca Más" – "Never Again" Report in Argentina," Leuven Transitional Justice Blog, 2019, https://law.kuleuven.be/ltjb/35th-anniversary-of-nunca-mas-never-again-report-in-argentina/.

79 Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo," 24.

80 Marjorie Agosi and Cola Franzen, "A Visit to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo," *Human Rights Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1987): 430.

81 Nancy Saporta Strenbach and Zelia Brizeno, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini: President of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo," *Feminist Teacher* 3, no. 1 (1987): 18. Translated by Kathleen Vickery.

82 Patrick Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 215.

83 Mabel Bellucci, "Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortiñas, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina," *Reproductive Health Matters* 7, no. 13 (1999): 84.

the tireless search," the women found strength in groups, seeking answers to help them reconcile with and process their loss.[84] In 1985, amidst the Trial of the Juntas, the mothers led 80,000 people in a march through Buenos Aires, shouting the slogan "justice and punishment for the guilty."[85] The mothers publicized their grief, anger, and demands in their assemblies right in the traditional center of civic life in Argentina, initially seeking answers about the disappearances of their children from President Videla, expressing outrage at the failures of the Trials, and further expanding their goals as new political leaders came into power.[86]

As answers to their demands were not easy to come by, another group of women, the Association of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, demanded that those who kidnapped the children of the disappeared return them to their legitimate families.[87] Estela Barnes de Carlotto, whose pregnant daughter was abducted and later killed in 1977, commented on the disappearance of her daughter and the harrowing search for her granddaughter. Barnes de Carlotto became president of The Grandmothers after realizing many mothers faced situations like hers, losing pregnant daughters, having their grandchildren taken by members of the military, and having their identities stolen. As the women spoke, they began drafting a series of demands, including the right to speak with judges, to write letters, and to publish notices in newspapers to uncover the truth about their stolen grandchildren. In a 1999 interview, one mother remarked that The Grandmothers felt as if they were "mothers of all the disappeared" on behalf of the 30,000 disappeared, and that they "gave birth to a full political and public life."[88]

The Grandmothers' focus on reuniting the children born to mothers held in captivity with their biological families centered on recovering their hidden identity, pursuing a policy of the "right to know" regarding the children kidnapped during the dictatorship.[89] In 1987, The Grandmothers helped establish the Argentine National Genetic Data Bank, which enabled grandmothers to donate DNA samples and compare them with those of potential grandchildren to facilitate reunification. This scientific form of legitimizing identity and memory helped provide legal proof of the identity of the abducted children. As of 2011, the Data Bank helped find 103 kidnapped children and reunite them with their families.[90]

The mothers and grandmothers' pursuit of justice, nonviolence, and participation in civil discourse on children's rights to identity and safety has positioned them as a progressive, democratic force in Argentina.[91] These protests, while not a measure of judicial effort to prosecute the junta, were composed of

84 Bellucci, "Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortiñas," 85–86.
85 Agosi, "A Visit to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo," 432.
86 Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo," 24.
87 Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo," 22.
88 Mabel Bellucci, "Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortiñas," 85.
89 Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo," 32, 35.
90 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm,* 48.
91 Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo," 23.

Argentines insisting upon answers to the silence, to uncover the fates of their loved ones, and reinforce the importance of speaking out against wrongdoings, even those committed by people in the highest echelons of society. The Grandmothers and Las Madres represented two generations of relatives who did not relinquish their insistence on truth and accountability and continued to define and pursue their own form of justice.

The Escrache and Other Methods of Memorialization

Beyond the efforts of Las Madres and The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, as the judicial system continued to fail the families of the victims, a younger generation composed of children of the disappeared formed the Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra el Olvido y el Silencio (HIJOS). In 1995, the HIJOS began leading demonstrations, known as escraches. The demonstrations represented an unconventional approach to protest, where members of the HIJOS followed former junta members around their neighborhoods, chanting and exposing their role in the state terror.[92] Escraches attempted to reveal the identities of torturers and advertise their complacency in the murder of thousands. They condemned the human rights abuses of those who benefited from the previous amnesty laws, essentially forming a "counter hegemonic culture of resistance."[93] These "outings" served as a non-judicial method of justice, as families of victims participating in the escraches, or even simple observers, saw those who played a role in torturing or killing their loved ones face the consequences for their actions, even if it was through the form of public humiliation and shame.

The HIJOS and their escraches would surround the house or block where known torturers or perpetrators lived. They would give speeches and performances, play music, and distribute fact flyers about the individual, revealing their name, address, and role within the military dictatorship.[94] The goal of the escrache was to promote a visible history and prevent a perpetrator from returning to "life as usual" and instead face accountability and disturbance in their work, personal, and social life.[95] These "disruptions" were critical in preserving memory and preventing Argentine society from accepting a life where they could live "with such violence and impunity in its midst."[96] The escrache directly challenged Menem's call for national reconciliation through the form of forgetting and instead introduced a method of reconciliation based on remembering the victims, and not forgetting those who contributed to their disappearances and deaths.[97]

Beyond the unique form of justice-seeking of the escrache, other collective memorialization methods emerged, including the creation of memorials, monuments, and museums to highlight the Dirty War. One site exists close

92 Davis, *State Terrorism*, 8.
93 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm,* 54.
94 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm,* 54.
95 Zaretsky, *Acts of Repair,* 91.
96 Zaretsky, *Acts of Repair,* 66.
97 Vaisman, *Variations on Justice*, 371.

to a former detention center, ESMA, one of the largest and most brutal torture centers in operation, where out of 5,000 detainees, only around 200 survived.[98] Now, a short distance away from the detention center lies the Parque de la Memoria, showcasing striking images associated with the military dictatorship, including outlines of pregnant women to represent some of the victims and airplanes to commemorate those who were thrown into the sea on the "death flights." Like many other memorials, a wall inscribed with the names of the disappeared illustrates the sheer magnitude of the junta's atrocities.[99] While the 1990s marked an era of pardons and forgiveness for the junta's crimes, civil society viewed this period as one characterized by intense action from human rights organizations, families, and victims, united around a common slogan of "no forgetting, no pardoning, justice!"[100]

Post-Transitional Justice Processes and Modern Argentina

Néstor Kirchner's administration marked the beginning of the post-transitional justice phase, which began in 2003 and was distinguished by the role of non-state actors, international involvement, and the judicialization of disputes and courts as instruments for disrupting impunity.[101] The judicial and non-judicial actors who emerged during and immediately after the Dirty War and the Trial of the Juntas had less support and faced more obstacles than those who rose to prominence several years after the Juntas. Particularly after the 2003 reforms that overturned the Full Stop and Due Obedience amnesty laws, President Kirchner and his successor and wife, Cristina Fernández, created "an opening for new waves of stories and narratives to emerge."[102] Under judicial and non-judicial pressures, the post-transitional justice process emerged at an increasing rate as people continued to demand the truth surrounding the fate of the disappeared and accountability for the crimes of the dictatorships.

The Judicial Post-Transitional Justice Process

Despite the many failures of the judicial transitional justice process during the Trial of the Juntas, post-transitional justice in Argentina in the early 2000s successfully promoted justice and accountability through various international legal efforts and human rights initiatives. The establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) led to the prosecution of war crimes committed under state orders by military personnel, much like in Argentina's Dirty War. However, the international nature of the court and the media attention received during the wars in the Balkans made the ICTY more successful in prosecuting the crimes than the Trial of the Juntas. Similarly, the creation of the International Criminal Court in 2002 demonstrated a wave of change and an enrichment of the current law.[103] These international standards,

98 Davis, *State Terrorism and Post-Transitional Justice*, 3.

99 Zaretsky, *Acts of Repair,* 102.

100 Sévane Garibian, "Truth versus impunity: Post-transitional justice in Argentina and the Human Rights Turn," *African Yearbook of Rhetoric* 6, issue 1, 2015, 67.

101 Vaisman, *Variations on Justice*, 377.

102 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm*, 37.

103 Garibian, "Truth versus impunity," 67.

which encouraged criminal prohibitions, helped set future standards for what could be considered crimes, broader than those defined by the Argentine military and civilian courts, which failed to recognize the crime of "disappearing" someone. The establishment of international courts, legitimized by international law and multilateralism, facilitated judicial post-transitional justice in Argentina and other transitional societies.

International groups focusing on human rights and repairing post-conflict societies encouraged and established new procedures for Argentine society from an outsider's perspective, attempting to share global standards of justice and accountability that were lacking in the years immediately following the war. In 1999, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights established a voluntary agreement, signed by the Argentine government, to recognize and guarantee the "right to the truth," standardizing the deployment system of "all possible means" to shed light on the disappeared.[104] Similarly, another international non-state body, the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), assisted local civil society and Argentine state actors in facilitating transitional justice. The ICTJ aimed to document Argentina's experiences with transitional justice, facilitate prosecutions, and engage with the victims. In 2009 and 2010, the ICTJ helped prosecutors identify evidence to reopen older cases shut down under the pro-immunity government, as well as promoted gender-based components of human rights abuses, a particularly pertinent issue in Argentina.[105] The formalization of these groups to support human rights and justice-building efforts, and to combat state abuses, illustrates a renewed emphasis on transitional justice.

The Domestic Post-Transitional Justice Process

Beyond the courts and the international organizations, relatives of the disappeared noted the meaningfulness of the Kirchner administration's role as "memory crafters" in providing moral and political recognition of their trauma. Beyond supporting the cultural forms of collective remembrance by creating various monuments and memorials, the President gave monetary reparations to surviving victims or their families.[106] In 2004, Kirchner marked the 28th anniversary of the coup by removing portraits of Videla from the military headquarters, as well as converting the former torture center into a "Museum of Memory" to honor the disappeared.[107] Kirchner's symbolic removal of portraits of those accused of human rights abuses highlighted a key acknowledgment of the inexcusable nature of these crimes and served as an important transitional justice mechanism.

An oral testimony collected in 2009 of Noemi Ciollaro, whose partner, Eduardo, disappeared in 1977, noted that the Kirchner government's public

104 Garibian, "Truth versus impunity," 68.

105 "Argentina," International Center for Transitional Justice, 2025.

106 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm*, 39.

107 "Argentina Confronts Past on Coup Anniversary." *Human Rights Watch*, March 24, 2004, https://www.hrw.org/news/2004/03/24/argentina-confronts-past-coup-anniversary.

expression and recognition "had a tremendous healing effect."[108] This effect largely emerged from the sharp contrast between the Kirchner administration's policies, which emphasized civil society, human rights, and accountability, and the previous governments' avoidance of the "Dirty War" problem and insistence on impunity.[109] Furthermore, in September 2003, at the UN General Assembly, Kirchner legitimized civil society and the extrajudicial fight, connecting the judiciary's role with non-judicial demands in a provocative speech. He pronounced that "we are children of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo," and emphasized "protection of human rights and the prosecution…of those who violate them."[110] However, despite the progress of the Kirchner administration, the right-wing government headed by Mauricio Macri undid some of their work, with a decrease in official support for the trials and a return to the discourse of impunity.[111]

Despite Macri's views, many non-judicial reconciliation and memorialization methods persisted. In 2011, the Argentine court accused and sentenced Jorge Luis Magnacco to ten years of house arrest for kidnapping children during the dictatorship, but the Court revoked his sentencing, and he therefore faced no judicial consequences. However, in response, in 2018, an escrache emerged against Magnacco. The escrache posted signs around Magnacco's neighborhood of Recoleta, labeling him a "baby thief" and urging his neighbors to ostracize him.[112] Despite the "climate of impunity," less pervasive than during the transitional justice period of the 1990s, this protest remained institutionalized and preferable to the judiciary form of transitional justice within Argentine society and political culture. The escraches signaled an "act of repair" and urged other Argentines not to forget the Dirty War, even decades after its conclusion.[113]

Another surprising form of memorialization in post-transitional justice Argentina emerged with the confession of former Navy Officer Adolfo Scilingo in 1995 as a direct participant in death flights, wherein "subversives" would be taken into planes and pushed out of them, plunging to their deaths. Until Scilingo's confession, the crime of the death flights was not confirmed, but was speculated or reported in oral testimonies by witnesses viewed as unreliable in a court of law. Following the release of his confession, several other ex-military men directly involved in the crimes of the juntas came forward to explain what happened, a phenomenon called the "Scilingo Effect."[114] While it was upsetting for relatives to hear perpetrators talk about their crimes, the confirmation of the

108 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm*, 40.

109 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm*, 40.

110 Fiona Duenyas, "Kirchnerismo and Beyond: Politicization of Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo," *Democratic Erosion Con*, 2020, https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2020/05/28/kirchnerismo-and-beyond-politicization-of-mothers-and-grandmothers-of-plaza-de-mayo/.

111 Capdepón and Figari Layús, *The Impact of Human Rights Prosecutions*, 104–105.

112 Zaretsky, *Acts of Repair*, 76.

113 Zaretsky, *Acts of Repair*, 77.

114 Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm*, 43.

deaths of their loved ones and this other side of the "truth" was necessary in promoting accountability. Instead of judgment under a court, the Scilingo Effect illustrated a unique form of accountability in a society characterized by a need for a truth that "might transcend juridical understandings."[115]

Conclusion

Transitional justice, as measured by the objectives of preventing the recurrence of crimes and repairing their damages, is an ongoing process. Even in the "post-transitional justice" phase of Argentina, and despite improvements in the judiciary promoting accountability and justice, the continued existence of non-judicial methods of justice-seeking reveals that much of society was not entirely "repaired," and still seeks answers from the state. With the deaths of around 30,000 Argentines, many of whom remained missing or whose children remained unidentified, complete reconciliation is not entirely possible for all Argentines. Nevertheless, advancements in both international and national judicial systems make it more likely that the goal of transitional justice—to prevent future crimes—will be achieved.

Given poor judicial outcomes and fundamental issues within the court system, memorialization and reconciliation efforts aimed at achieving transitional justice were embraced as effective alternatives, remaining a powerful force to ensure that both Argentines and the world do not forget the crimes of the junta. The Argentine struggle for transitional justice illustrates the limitations of legal measures while underscoring non-judicial methods of remembrance in the pursuit of accountability and closure. However, the post-transitional justice process successfully connected the judiciary and civil society, influencing reforms, memory, and accountability for those affected.

Elsa Mitchell is an undergraduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, graduating in May 2026 with degrees in History and Peace, War, and Defense. Her senior thesis examines transitional justice and the factors that shape whether societies achieve accountability or face impunity following periods of political conflict. She is also a blog contributor for the Journal of Foreign Affairs at Carolina (JFAC) and a Carolina Diplomacy Fellow.

115 Zaretsky, *Acts of Repair*, 3.

“Wash Me Sins Away”: Gendered Punishment and Containment in Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries

Mikaela Mueller
University of North Carolina - Asheville

Abstract: Between the 1920s and their closure in 1996, Ireland’s Magdalene laundries confined thousands of women and girls who were deemed morally or socially deviant by the combined power of the Church and State. Under the supervision of nuns, the women were forced to do unpaid domestic labor that served as both punishment and a method of moral rehabilitation. The Magdalene laundries operated as instruments of social and institutional containment within a larger established cultural system that regulated women’s behavior in line with an idealized Irish identity defined by chastity and obedience. The Church and State’s obsession with perceived moral degeneration fueled their efforts to both “cure” the nation of such behavior and to conceal the fact that it existed in the first place. The endurance of the institutions throughout the twentieth century was facilitated by both the State’s capitulation to the Church and by public complicity. An ingrained culture of silence and shame normalized the confinement of women and girls, allowing their systemic abuse to persist in what was virtually plain sight.

Introduction

From the early 1920s to their closure in 1996, Ireland’s Magdalene laundries interned thousands of girls and women deemed socially unfit. The women were forced to do unpaid domestic labor under the label of repentance and rehabilitation, directed by various orders of the Catholic Church and supported by the Irish State. While iterations of the laundries had existed for prostitutes and impoverished women throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their populations shifted drastically post-independence. In the new Irish State, the laundries increasingly confined unmarried mothers, as well as girls transferred from other state institutions, such as orphanages, industrial schools, mother and baby homes, and girls otherwise deemed “backward.”[1] The Magdalene laundries served as institutions of moral containment, part of a larger institutional and social system that developed in the decades after Ireland’s independence to

1 James M. Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 45.

restrict women's behavior in accordance with an idealized Irish identity.

Defined by "purity, chastity, and virtue," Ireland's ideal woman was an embodiment of the new government's aspirations of moral purity, and by extension, a direct contrast to the perceived moral decay of British identity from which the State aimed to separate itself after achieving self-governance in 1922.[2] The Catholic Church and Irish government considered any digressions from these standards, particularly manifested through female sexuality, to be threats to the moral foundations of the nation. Their close cooperation to obscure such expressions allowed the laundries to persist throughout the twentieth century. Furthermore, this perception of female sexuality at the governing levels of society worked through political, religious, and cultural hierarchies to build a culture that rationalized the punishment and confinement of women and girls for the moral betterment of society. Through the forced practice of domestic and traditionally feminine forms of labor, the use of moral correction through shame, and the constant enforcement of silence, womanhood in these spaces was purposefully defined by obedience.

Historiography

Before 2001, there had been little to no scholarship about Ireland's Magdalene laundries, likely due to the taboo surrounding the institutions and social norms of respectability that continued to justify the protection of the Church and its convents. Over time, the publishing of survivor accounts and activists' work has challenged the narrative of protection and respectability. In turn, academic writing on the laundries has moved away from brief descriptions of the laundries as "homes for fallen women" to more in-depth analyses of the women and their experiences, as well as the broader systems of Irish institutional containment.

Early mentions of the laundries appeared briefly within broader histories of mid-twentieth-century Ireland, where authors emphasize the profound influence of the Catholic Church on society at the time. Richard B. Finnegan and Edward T. McCaron's *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics* (2000) is representative of the early approach to the laundries, referenced in passing as "convents that cared for 'Fallen Women'" when discussing the control the Church had over women's roles in society.[3] The first book-length research on the laundries, Frances Finnegan's 2004 *Do Penance or Perish*, explains the transition from their predecessors in the eighteenth century as houses of reform for

2 Clara Fischer, "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame: Magdalen Laundries and the Institutionalization of Feminine Transgression in Modern Ireland," *Signs* 41, no. 4 (2016): 822.

3 Richard B. Finnegan and Edward T. McCaron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 125–138 .

prostitutes to the twentieth-century "female penitentiary systems."[4] Finnegan's focus on the Good Shepherd Order limits the scope of the research to the laundries of Limerick and New Ross, and she overlooks the complicity of the State and wider society with her emphasis on the culpability of the nuns who ran the laundries.

Subsequent work follows similar patterns, with scholars noting the laundries as products of the Church's influence on the State in the decades before and after Ireland's independence. Dermot Keogh's chapter "The Catholic Church in Ireland since the 1950s" in *The Church Confronts Modernity* (2007) echoes the emphasis on the role of the Church in drafting the Irish Constitution and its moral influence on Irish society. He defines the laundries as homes for "unmarried mothers and/or 'fallen women.'"[5] Lindsey Earner-Byrne's chapter "Illegitimate Motherhood, 1922–60" in *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Dublin* (2007) examines the legal and social stigma of unmarried mothers, examining motherhood as something legitimized through marriage.[6] She notes the laundries as an option among the various institutions that an unmarried mother could go to. In both works, the author's descriptions of the populations within the laundries are limited. They, alongside many authors of the time, fail to note both the range of who was confined in them and the broader cultural system that sustained them.

James M. Smith's 2007 *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* was a turning point in scholarship on the laundries, becoming a foundational text in Magdalene laundry research through his placement of the laundries within a broader "architecture of containment." Linking the laundries to other state-run institutions, he argues that both their foundation and longevity were due to a state-backed system of nationally gendered incarceration. He describes the systemic and national nature of women's and girls' incarceration through the intersection of legislation, social norms, and national identity.[7]

Since 2007, research on the laundries has largely built on Smith's framework of government and church organized institutionalization as a method of control. Rebecca L. McCarthy's *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries* (2010)

4 Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish : Magdalen Asylums in Ireland*, 2nd ed. (NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

5 Dermot Keogh, "The Catholic Church in Ireland since the 1950s," in *The Church Confronts Modernity: Catholicism since 1950 in the United States, Ireland, and Quebec*, ed. Leslie Woodcock Tentler (Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 93–149.

6 Lindsey Earner-Byrne, "Illegitimate Motherhood, 1922–60," in *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Dublin* (Manchester University Press, 2007), 172–220.

7 Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 42.

traces the roots of the laundry system to Ireland's identity as an English colony, arguing that the development of the "convent asylum system" was a result of post-independent Ireland's desire to create a distinct national morality based on the regulation of women's bodies.[8] Similarly, Clara Fischer's "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame" (2016) argues that the laundries were the result of the efforts of the Irish State and the Catholic Church to create an Irish identity that consequently connected the legitimacy of the state to female purity.[9] Such works highlight that the control of the female body was justified for the purpose of nation-building.

Renewed political advocacy throughout the 2010s was largely incited by the 2013 McAleese Report, or the government investigation into State involvement with the Magdalene laundries that found "significant" involvement, and Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny's subsequent official apology to laundry survivors.[10] It encouraged scholars to reexamine the combined roles of the church and state, as well as the public's complicity in shaping Smith's proposed "architecture of containment." Sarah-Anne Buckley's 2013 "Institutionalisation, the State and the NSPCC" discusses the broader system of state-funded and church-run institutions, such as industrial and convent schools that institutionalized children in poverty and were often connected directly to the laundries.[11] Bridget Harrison's "Factory and workshop legislation and convent laundries, 1895–1907: campaigning for a Catholic exception" (2021) further reveals how the State enabled the exploitation of women's labor by exempting convents and the laundries from state inspections and labor regulations.[12]

More recent scholarship has turned to retrospective and comparative approaches. Ronit Lentin's "A Woman Died: Abortion and the Politics of Birth in Ireland" (2013) traces how systems of institutional control have emerged in the twenty-first century through the control of immigrant reproductive rights.[13] Sharon Tighe-Mooney's "Irreconcilable Differences?: The Fraught Relationship between Women and the Catholic Church in Ireland" (2017) examines how the legacy of the laundries played a role in Ireland's social and political separation

---

8 Rebecca L. McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries: An Analytical History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), 93.

9 Fischer, "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame," 821–43.

10 Department of Justice, "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries," 1–10.

11 Sarah-Anne Buckley, "Institutionalisation, the State and the NSPCC." In *The Cruelty Man: Child Welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889–1956* (Manchester University Press, 2013), 110.

12 Bridget Harrison, "Factory and workshop legislation and convent laundries, 1895–1907: campaigning for a Catholic exception," *Irish Historical Studies* 45, 168 (2021): 223–38.

13 Ronit Lentin, "A Woman Died: Abortion and the Politics of Birth in Ireland," *Feminist Review*, no. 105 (2013): 130–36.

from the Catholic Church.[14] Sarah A. Whitt's "Wash Away Your Sins: Indigenous and Irish Women in Magdalene Laundries and the Poetics of Errant Histories" (2023) applies the framework of institutionalization to the experiences of Indigenous women and girls in boarding schools, industrial schools, and American Magdalene laundries.[15] These studies aim to apply frameworks that have been developed around laundries to both modern-day and more global structures of gendered containment.

Within the context of a relatively recent historiography, this paper primarily builds on the argument that the Church and State collaborated to achieve an Irish moral order through control over the female body. Using survivor testimonies, it will examine how this manifested in the containment and punishment of the women and girls in the laundries. While much of the previous scholarship tends to understate the general public's awareness of the laundries' existence, this paper takes the stance that much of the public was aware of their existence; however, the social architecture of twentieth-century Ireland was built on a deeply ingrained deference to the authority of the Church that both concealed the actions of the laundries and resisted any investigation into them.

Early Laundries

In 1767, philanthropist Arabella Denny opened the first Magdalene laundry, then called a Magdalen asylum, specifically for Protestant "fallen women," or prostitutes.[16] There, the women would work for their room and board and could only leave with permission once they secured outside employment or housing. Denny's Magdalen asylum set a model for the first asylums established by individuals and religious orders of various denominations in the late 1700s and early 1800s.[17] As Ireland industrialized and urban internal migration increased, many of these smaller laundries closed or were taken over by Catholic orders, particularly hoping to address the issues they saw emerging in the rapidly changing social landscape brought on by famine and rapid industrial growth.[18] The convents that ran them positioned themselves as moral authorities, attempting to restore Ireland's social stability by confronting the sole issue of prostitution.

14 Sharon Tighe-Mooney, "Irreconcilable Differences?: The Fraught Relationship between Women and the Catholic Church in Ireland," in *Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism: From Galway to Cloyne and Beyond*, ed. Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien (Manchester University Press, 2017), 192.

15 Sarah A. Whitt, "Wash Away Your Sins: Indigenous and Irish Women in Magdalene Laundries and the Poetics of Errant Histories," *American Indian Culture And Research Journal* 46, no. 3 (2023): 3.

16 McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 238.

17 Department of Justice, "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee," 37.

18 Department of Justice, "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee," 42.

By the mid to late 1800s, the institutions had become entirely associated with "fallen women," particularly due to the high rates of brothels in larger cities.[19] However, in reality, the populations of the laundries had widened to include any woman considered "likely to end up on the streets."[20] This included unmarried mothers, whose existence were considered particularly immoral. Societal expectations for Irish women in the post-famine era were defined by the moral standards of the Catholic Church. The ideal Irish woman was faithful and subordinate, with her labor confined to the home and sexuality confined to marriage.[21] These notions of female respectability, as aligned with purity, saw that any power they had in society was solely moral. Nuns, as the perceived exemplars of virtuous behavior, became the managers of the laundries, serving simultaneously as networks of social control for the Church and as models of female respectability.[22]

This combination of social, religious, and moral responsibilities positioned the Catholic Church in alignment with the interests of many Irish politicians of the time. It was during this period of heightened indignation towards the British Parliament that the Church formed a partnership with a group of prominent Irish politicians in the early 1900s. As the British government introduced labor and safety reforms, Irish nationalist politicians vehemently opposed their implementation within convent laundries in defense of the protection and privacy of the nuns running the laundries.[23] After a decade of back and forth, the laundries were eventually exempted from state investigation and interference in 1907, an exemption that continued after Ireland gained its independence in 1922.[24] The Irish Parliamentary Party's close association with and protection of the Catholic Church during British rule established a precedent of a Church position in the development of State policy.

Church-State Collaboration

Following the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922, positioning Ireland as a self-governing dominion of Britain, this precedent ensured that the Church influenced state-building at almost every level. Both subsequent administrations of the new Ireland, under W.T. Cosgrave (1922–32) and Eamon de Valera (1932–48), embraced the heightened role of the Church in the new government and implemented conservative policies that aligned with the Church's moral values. This Church doctrine on gender and sexuality was primarily one of "sexual puritanism," seen in the gendered separation of schools

19 Department of Justice, "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee," 38.
20 Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries,* 25.
21 Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries,* 26.
22 Harrison, "Factory and workshop legislation," 225.
23 Harrison, "Factory and workshop legislation," 233.
24 Harrison, "Factory and workshop legislation," 223–29.

and the 1935 ban on the sale of contraceptives.[25] It manifested most clearly and decisively after Ireland achieved full sovereignty in 1937. The Constitution of the Republic of Ireland recognized the "special position" of the Catholic Church and directly stated that a woman's "life within the home" defined her role in society.[26] These policies were imposed on nearly every aspect of life and were largely accepted by a devout Catholic population. The national and social identity became even more entwined with the Catholic Church's moral doctrine.

The collaboration was most visible in the realm of education, where the Church oversaw primary and secondary education with the state's funding. The curriculum was shaped around rigid moral standards and enforced by discipline and a lack of personal choice.[27] Deference to the Catholic Church, then, became a fundamental teaching in the most foundational moment of a child's education, reinforcing the long-standing cultural behavior that allowed the Church to dominate state social policy. After state officials completed the 1931 Carrigan Report, an unpublished but internally influential report on sexual crimes and rising rates of children born out of wedlock, moral panic surrounding the family and motherhood only grew.[28] The Church and state higher-ups largely placed the blame for these issues upon unmarried mothers and "uncontrolled" female sexuality. The popular solution put women in the "institutional care" of the Church, which offered them a sense of relative anonymity, physical shelter, and most importantly, assisted in their "moral regeneration."[29] The general acceptance of this solution set a precedent that allowed Irish state figures to place the management of social issues in the hands of the Church. As a result, these issues were often hidden away for the sake of maintaining Irish Catholic moral reputation, rather than being confronted publicly and directly.

Smith's concept of Ireland's institutional "architecture of containment" demonstrates how the Church's dominance in the new state created and sustained the gendered moral conditions that enabled the laundries to endure throughout the twentieth century. This "architecture" consisted of a network of Church-run and state-supported institutions that were assisted by state legislation and a public who deferred to church authority unquestioningly.[30] These systems were further representative of a social attitude towards the obfuscation of "social realities," particularly illegitimacy and sexual abuse. This architecture included institutions such as orphanages and industrial schools that functioned similarly to the laundries as places of containment. Although the school system did not include the laundries directly, they perpetuated the same structures of

25 Finnegan and McCaron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes,* 125–26.
26 Tighe-Mooney, "Irreconcilable Differences?" 194.
27 Finnegan and McCaron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes,* 107.
28 Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries,* 6.
29 Earner-Byrne, "Illegitimate Motherhood, 1922–60, 176.
30 Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries,* 2.

female subordination, with nuns often assigning laundering duties to girls and directly sending them to the laundries once they were older. It was this cycle of institutional containment and social acquiescence that transformed the makeup and role of such institutions, from prostitutes in early asylums to a range of young women and girls in early Ireland's Magdalene laundries.

The institutionalization of the children and young adults of Ireland began early on in their lives, facilitated by the Church, State, their families, and law enforcement. According to the McAleese Report, the route of entry of the laundries was around 28% undocumented, 27% non-state, 19% state, and 18.6% transfer from other laundries or congregations.[31] The transfer of inhabitants between institutions occurred as they aged out, misbehaved, or became pregnant. Consequently, these church and state authorities frequently transferred a number of the young women in or out of the laundries into other institutions, whether it be an orphanage, industrial school, or mother and baby home.[32] Irish law enforcement sent a number of girls directly to the laundries, sometimes after months-long court processes and sometimes with no legal process at all.[33] The religious orders that ran the institutions always facilitated these transfers, working in close communication with state officials. Whether organized by the Church and State or by families in consultation with the laundries, admissions into these institutions largely excluded the girls from the decision, disclosing as little information as possible about where they were going. This culture of secrecy gave the Church almost absolute authority over the "correctional" functions of the laundries and allowed the State to maintain an image of national and moral stability.

This emphasis on the secrecy of the laundries only seemed to intensify between the 1920s and 1960s, as the stigma of untoward female behavior became deeply ingrained within the social consciousness. Families often sent girls to the laundries in an attempt to protect themselves from scandal. One unmarried mother recalled being sent in 1966 "to get away as far as possible" to protect her family's reputation, and especially her siblings' prospects.[34] Often, when girls were told that they were acting out of order, threats to be

31 Department of Justice, "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries," 164.

32 Mary Jefferies "Oral History of Mary Jefferies," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, June 12, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 7.

33 Evelyn, "Oral History of Evelyn," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, March 2, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 3.

34 Bernadette, "Oral History of Bernadette," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, February 11, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 6–9.

sent to the laundries served as punishment and a method of behavior control. Another woman, sent in 1967, described being labeled a "problem child" as a way of justifying her removal from her home.[35] In any instance, once inside the laundry, the nuns forbade the girls from discussing why they were there, even if many were never told why they were there in the first place.[36] The laundries thus served as physical manifestations of Ireland's moral contradictions. The religious orders claimed to reform women deemed "likely to fall," yet never fully defined what this meant.[37] Furthermore, both the Church and State refused to investigate the underlying causes of these vaguely defined failures, instead working to preserve the laundries as institutions of concealment to retain a surface-level image of moral purity.

Control and Punishment within the Laundries

Inside the laundries, the methods of discipline served to instill a sense of shame within the inhabitants. Humiliation, physical and psychological abuse, and unpaid labor all served as methods of control and punishment. Further abuse occurred in the form of medical malpractice and the lack of labor safety procedures, a direct consequence of the state's non-involvement and its assumption of trust in the nuns' corrective methods. While similar forms of abuse occurred in other Church- and State-run institutions, the laundries' particular form of discipline through the daily rituals of work, prayer, and silence was designed to evoke feelings of gendered shame and repentance in its inhabitants.

Among the many methods of discipline described by survivors, the imposition of silence within the laundry was present in every aspect of their daily lives. One 1963 testimony described their daily routine as "[w]ork, prayer, sleeping, and a little bit of food," with interactions between the girls highly discouraged.[38] The nuns enforced silence to maintain constant work productivity and to isolate the girls from each other. It further trained them in passivity, as it associated the practice of domestic labor with silence. The silence was often filled with "holy things," such as a nun reading from a Bible as the girls worked, or prayers playing from amplifiers that the girls were expected to repeat as they worked.[39] In the eyes of the State, the nuns were teachers and enforcers

---

35 Martha, "Oral History of Martha," interview by Katherine O'Donnell, February 28, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 15.

36 Doris, "Oral History of Doris," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, July 23, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 45.

37 Smith, Ireland's Magdalen Laundries, 46.

38 Mary Currington, "Oral History of Mary Currington," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, February 23, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 23.

39 Kathleen, "Oral History of Kathleen," interview by Claire McGettrick, July 3,

of respectable female behavior. The labor of washing laundry served to train women in domestic duties, while the reinforcement of silence and prayer molded them into obedient and penitent women, the ideal of female Irish respectability.

Punishments in the laundries were a combination of bodily and verbal abuse. Testimonies between the 1940s and the 1960s describe hair-shearing upon their arrival, arbitrary beatings, and solitary confinement as commonly used disciplinary practices that occurred under the guise of moral correction. A testimony of a girl who was interred in 1949 describes the use of solitary confinement without a bathroom as punishment for talking back.[40] Nuns often paired physical discomfort and isolation with verbal abuse and victim blaming, all designed to constantly reinforce the girls' supposed moral failings. As late as 1966, a girl described being covered in disinfectant to "wash [her] sins away" upon her entry, and was later told that she would be given a new name to ensure no one knew who she was.[41] The nuns renamed every girl upon arrival to maintain anonymity, further disconnecting the girl from her identity before she entered the laundry. This purposeful erasure, verbal degradation, and isolation stripped women of their personal identities and replaced them with shame that reflected the Church and State's goals of dissuading morally impure behavior.

Abuse further manifested in the laundries' exploitative labor practices and medical malpractice, revealing the consequences of the state's exemption of the laundries from inspection. One survivor described getting burns from scalding wet sheets and being told by a nun that " . . . your arms will get used to it."[42] Medical neglect was equally frequent due to the state's lack of regulation and the nuns' lack of training. In 1967, one woman, sent to a laundry pregnant at fifteen, endured a dangerous pregnancy: she was given sleeping pills and a symphysiotomy, a last-resort operation during childbirth that requires the breaking of the pelvis, by an under-trained nun, afterwards going blind due to untreated preeclampsia.[43] The lack of professional medical care demonstrates that the girls' injuries and pain were seen as deserved and unworthy of outside treatment, simultaneously serving to keep them entirely confined to the laundries.

2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 2.

40 Catherine Whelan, "Oral History of Catherine Whelan," interview by James Smith, May 20, 2015, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Rgirlslaundriesesearch Council, 15.

41 Pippa Flanagan, "Oral History of Pippa Flanagan," interview by Claire McGettrick, August 5, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 2.

42 Whelan, "Oral History," 24.

43 Mary Creighton, "Oral History of Mary Creighton," interview by Katherine O'Donnell, May 16, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 32–34.

Another survivor who lived in a laundry in 1964 described the lack of basic safety protections, saying, "there were bars on the window – the door was locked behind you . . . If there was a fire, you were just a goner."[44] The State's lack of inspection was rationalized through traditional gendered divisions of labor, as extended into social responsibilities. Where the public sphere of politics fell to men, the moral reformation of young women through domestic labor was put in the hands of female religious figures and their private, hidden convents. This separation culminated in the severe oversight of exploitative and abusive labor practices, an oversight that later enabled the State to deflect responsibility for what occurred within the laundries.

Although the conditions of the girls' entries were decided by external figures, whether they were families or the state, their exits were almost entirely dependent on the laundries. The nuns withheld information from the penitents about almost every aspect of their incarceration, from entry to exit, leading many to believe they would never be released. A survivor explained that "nobody had a release date . . . until the people who put them in decided . . . not a penny in my pocket to make a phone call to say, 'please come and help me.'"[45] Even if freedom was theoretically possible, the material and psychological isolation in which the women lived made them dependent on the system that incarcerated them. This cycle saw that many women remained in the laundries for life. Multiple testimonies describe living alongside elderly women who had entered the institutions as children and lived their whole lives within the laundries.[46] Although the laundries supposedly served to train girls in employable skills, little else was done to support the supposed goal of a transition back into society.

A strict hierarchy existed between the nuns and their penitents, clearly demonstrated in their decision to withhold any access to the outside world from the girls. One survivor described the lack of media and information from outside the laundries, saying, "I don't ever remember having a radio, there was no telly . . . that was a sin, having a television. And no newspapers, you were being punished, you see."[47] The disconnect from the outside world served simultaneously to punish the girls and to protect them from negative outside influences. Any exposure to other ways of life was kept to the barest minimum, leaving what they witnessed and experienced in the laundries as their only references of female behavior. Another attested to the nun's paranoia when visitors came to the laundries, saying, "You would never answer a door if a bell was ringing. You'd have to leave it ringing till one of the nuns went and opened it . . .

44 Kathleen, "Oral History," 3.
45 Bernadette, "Oral History," 10.
46 Doris, "Oral History," 40.
47 Evelyn, "Oral History," 14.

Because we were inside a big wall."[48] The secrecy was an integral part of the laundries' function, keeping those inside separated from external influence and those outside unaware of who was confined and why.

The oral histories of survivors suggest that the purpose of the laundries remained ambiguous to those that lived in them. The nuns gave the girls few answers to their questions regarding why they were there or what the purpose of their "penance" was. One survivor described an interaction she had with a nun in 1958, where the nun described the purpose of the laundries, "to make you fit for the outside world." When the survivor questioned her further, asking, "How am I going to know what's in the outside world if I'm not let out into the outside world?" she was not given an answer. [49] The contradictory and ambiguous nature of what the girls were told, as well as every internal aspect of the women's incarceration, denotes the implicit failures of the institution.

Meant to rehabilitate and prepare women to become respectable and responsible members of society, they were instead systematically punished, shamed, and abused, harming their chances for reintegration. In particular, children who grew up in the system, whether from impoverished families or otherwise associated with a social stigma such as illegitimacy, were institutionalized as a preventative measure rather than anything they had done themselves. If these girls were able to leave the laundries, they typically had a more difficult time adjusting to life outside of them, never having been taught how to live outside an institutional system. One woman, born in 1928, described growing up in an orphanage and working in the laundry as a child, and later transferred to various institutions and laundries. After getting transferred to work outside of a laundry, she said, "It was frightening. I felt I wanted to be back in there again, you know. You get the fear of God back in you because you were entombed in there, weren't you?"[50] Her apprehension of living outside the laundries highlights the contradictory nature of the laundries. Though they were intended to "reform" women's behavior and prepare them for society, they instead created a dependency on the institutions within an environment that equated their existence with obedience and shame.

Public Perspectives and Complicity

The longevity of the laundries, while largely dependent on the unwilling submission of its penitents and the State's blind eye, also relied heavily on a broader public complicity, an effect of ingrained deference to the Church. The public's acceptance of the laundries was based on the paradoxical perception of

48 Jefferies, "Oral History," 9.

49 Nora Lynch, "Oral History of Nora Lynch," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, July 24, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 22.

50 Jefferies, "Oral History," 42.

them as both charitable homes and places where girls disappeared. This paradox was accepted because of an innate trust in the Church's care for the women and girls who lived in the laundries. While many of the women who entered the laundries had never heard of them before, many others were aware of their reputation. One who entered in 1958 described the social reputation of the laundries, comparing them to mental institutions. She said: "It's like if someone's gone down to prison for life, you know they're not going to come out. That was the same effect the Magdalene Laundry had on us. Only mad people or bad people went in there, and that was the end of it."[51] To some people, especially of the younger generation, the laundries were regarded similarly to prisons or mental institutions: places to fear and be threatened with. In any case, public knowledge and perception of the laundries were shaped by social stigma, rather than any accessible information about them. This reflected a broader social policing and understanding of female sexuality through fear and pressure over education.

The combined fear and reverence of the laundries was reflective of a larger culture of the Church's moral surveillance, as well as the general perception of sex, pregnancy, and illegitimacy.[52] Because such topics were rarely discussed, the understanding of the laundries as secret and stigmatized was a natural extension of this societal manner, one that recognized female sexuality through fear and shame instead of health and education. To the ordinary townsperson, the inhabitants of the laundries were both visible and invisible. Residents were aware of their existence, perceived the buildings in which they resided, and sometimes interacted with the girls, whether they worked for the laundries or saw them around town. However, vague awareness and brief interactions did little to foster a connection between the girls and the towns' residents. For instance, a student in Limerick in the mid-1960s described a "social gap" between townspeople and the girls that went unquestioned because "[y]ou are brainwashed that the priest is superior and better than you."[53] This similarly shaped the common opinion of the government; both were rooted in an assumption of the Church's moral and spiritual superiority. This deference was so deeply ingrained in Irish daily life that the Church's decisions, including those of its institutions, were understood as beyond criticism.

Other accounts from people who lived near or interacted with the laundries reinforce the degree of literal and psychological separation between the laundries' inhabitants and society. The descriptions of their high walls and

---

51 Margaret Burke, "Oral History of Margaret Burke," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, February 26, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 21.

52 Tighe-Mooney, "Irreconcilable Differences?" 194.

53 Michael Cowhey, "Oral History of Michael Cowhey," interview by Evelyn Glynn, August 2010, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 4.

"fierce security" emphasize this as a deliberate choice central to their purposes of limiting the influence of supposedly immoral women on the public.[54] Those who interacted with the laundry, such as deliverers or other workers involved with the organization, described the process of entering the building as ". . . a closed-door type of set up" that made it difficult to enter or exit them.[55] This separation, along with the laundries' image as a correctional institution, encouraged the belief that its inhabitants deserved their confinement, an assumption that justified their exclusion. What the public assumed about the laundries from their limited perspectives was only ever enough to stigmatize the women, never enough to challenge the institutions themselves.

Some townspeople further believed that the laundries provided a necessary service for women and girls who would have otherwise been out on the streets. One woman who worked near a laundry and interacted with its inhabitants argued that the laundries "have a very bad reputation . . . and some of it is deserved, but . . . [t]his is a place where they would be fed, where they would be clothed . . . and a lot of them would not have had that."[56] This perspective, a common one at the time, worked under the assumption that it was only poor or vulnerable girls who were placed in the laundries. The emphasis on what the nuns provided in terms of food, clothing, and shelter demonstrates how the Church was largely able to obscure the realities of what the inhabitants experienced, allowing the public to view the laundries as charitable services. Another outsider recalled that the girls ". . . seemed to be happy enough . . . [and] I think they were well looked after accommodation-wise."[57] Ultimately, the outside perspective, especially in retrospect, reveals both the townspeoples' willingness to let the Church manage the laundries and their reluctance to investigate further into what occurred inside them.

The behavior of the girls only increased the psychological distance in their rare interactions with outsiders. They were frequently described as quiet, shy, and keeping to themselves, a practice of what was taught to them within the laundries through punishment and silence. A man who delivered laundry for the Good Shepherd convent noted that paid workers only interacted with nuns and that "[t]he women were kept behind the scenes . . . They were very shy."[58] Another man who grew up around a laundry and saw the girls on their super-

---

54 Pat O'Byrne, "Oral History of Pat O'Byrne," interview by Evelyn Glynn, October 2010, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 2.

55 O'Byrne, "Oral History," 2.

56 Anne Culhane, "Oral History of Anne Culhane," interview by Evelyn Glynn, December 2008, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Research Council, 1.

57 O'Byrne, "Oral History," 2.

58 O'Byrne, "Oral History," 1.

vised walks said, "They wouldn't be allowed to stop and speak to you now or anything like that – like school kids."[59] Such behavior reflected the nuns' control both inside the laundries and in how the girls presented themselves in public. Their silence and shyness were deliberately molded into them through training and punishment meant to instill obedience.

In this way, the State's goal of teaching traditionally feminine manners through the nuns was successful, reinforcing the belief that the laundries were places of moral correction. However, a woman who worked with children from a laundry described them as fearful and reserved, saying: "They were never happy. There was a great fear there – no matter what you were doing with them."[60] The reformatory nature of the laundries was, in many cases, traumatic for the girls, with their discipline and reserve in public reflecting this. Ultimately, these outside accounts reveal a split between what the public chose to perceive and what the institutions perpetrated. While much of what they saw raised questions, it was interpreted and rationalized then through an unwavering trust in the Church's intentions.

This selective perception continued into the early 1970s. While little was discussed on the laundries themselves, mother and baby homes began gaining attention, with mixed opinions of their roles in society. The homes served a similar function to the laundries, administered by the state and run by religious orders to train unmarried pregnant women in domestic occupations (such as laundry work) for a period of time during and after their pregnancies.[61] In a 1970 article interview with both a Church representative and a Dublin Health Authority official, the author stressed the "bright" and "cheerful atmosphere" of a Dublin location.[62] The article emphasizes the anonymity of the women and girls there and further presents it as a refuge for them. Both the Mother Superior and the State representative insisted that "the girls feel accepted and loved," that "[t]he idea that people had that the homes are punitive is totally wrong," and that ultimately, the decision to place one's baby for adoption was solely the mother's. Similar rhetoric was frequently used when discussing the laundries, framed around the protection of the girl and reinforcing her need for privacy, which ultimately kept both institutions from any outside inspection or criticism. In both cases, the Church's intervention is framed as a necessary

59 John Gilligan, "Oral History of John Gilligan," interview by Evelyn Glynn, December 2008, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 4.

60 Mary O'Mara, "Oral History of Mary O'Mara," interview by Evelyn Glynn, June 2010, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 2.

61 Earner-Byrne, "Illegitimate Motherhood, 1922–60," 187–9.

62 Mary Anderson, "These mothers are not outcasts of today," *Irish Independent (Dublin)*, Nov 28, 1970, 7.

function in society. Despite some push for liberal reform in the late 1970s, Irish society continued to uphold an image of the Catholic Church's benevolence that hid its coercion over the country's morality.

Shifting Political and Social Landscapes

The 1980s ushered in changes that saw a society caught between liberalizing reform measures, such as legalized contraception, and attempts by the Catholic Church to maintain its grip on the state and the culture.[63] By the 1990s, neither the Church, the State, nor the public could comfortably preserve the idea of the Church's uncontested moral superiority. The reveal of a series of scandals, including allegations of clerical sexual abuse and abuse in State- and religious-run institutions, caused a drastic shift in public opinion that forced Ireland to confront what had been swept under the rug for the previous decades. The Church's mismanaged responses to these allegations created a "crisis of credibility" that persisted for the following decades.[64] As scrutiny intensified at the end of the twentieth century, this attention became directed at the laundries. Questions arose regarding what actually occurred within them, as well as how State powers and societal complicity had allowed them to persist unquestioned for as long as they did.

One such crisis of credibility occurred after it was revealed in 1993 that the High Park convent had exhumed a mass grave containing the remains of 155 women who had lived and died in the laundry. After this story broke, many laundry survivors and family members of survivors felt encouraged to come out with their stories. These early interviews align with the oral histories conducted in 2013, where one survivor described grueling hours of work, uncertain terms of release, and the constantly enforced silence that consumed daily life. In addition to the survivor testimony, the article is notable in its description of the laundries and their deviation from their original intentions: "[I]nstead of just staying a few months in a caring atmosphere, many girls remained shut away for decades."[65] In another account from the daughter of a woman who had been in the Irish care system, she described finding no other record of her mother, not even her death certificate.[66] The perception of the laundries after the discovery shifted drastically from one of a temporary home for wayward girls to one of mass interment and disappeared women.

The exhumation of the High Park mass grave further forced the Irish public to come to terms with the generational and emotional implications of

63 Tighe-Mooney, "Irreconcilable Differences?" 200.
64 Keogh, "The Catholic Church in Ireland since the 1950s," 133.
65 Terry McGeehan, "Fate of 'Fallen Girls' is Exposed," *The Star (Dublin)*, Jul 28, 1993, 13.
66 Catherine Murphy, "Heartbreak search for 'my Magdalen,'" *Evening Herald (Dublin)*, September 9, 1993, 3.

the laundries. Among the most controversial debates centered on the remembrance of the Magdalene laundries and their survivors. Various opinion pieces throughout the early 1990s reveal a combination of outrage, shock, and defensiveness. One rather controversial article criticized what the author saw as “a flurry of unfocused moral outrage,” arguing that the outcry over the mass grave should instead be directed at the nuns’ treatment of the women while they were still alive.[67] Other opinions defended the laundries, with one characterizing them as “the best shot [of] an ignorant society . . . at providing humane care for its physical and mental rejects” and sympathizing with the nuns as victims of “rigid class structures.”[68] Such rhetoric views the laundries as necessary, if harsh, products of their time, displacing blame onto a past society rather than the current Church and State’s combined authority or societal blindness.

The author’s interviews of those who came to pay respects at the grave reveal a different narrative. For many families, outrage stemmed from the continued injustice the women received in both life and death, saying, “. . . the nuns conveniently forgot that relatives exist. It seems that the Magdalen women, unworthy in life, were also found unworthy in death.”[69] She describes the conflict and grief of the families of those women and girls who had effectively been erased from society. Rather than framing them as past incidents of an older society, these accounts place the laundries in real time and demonstrate how such erasure produced a generational trauma based on the gendered erasure of female family members.

The institutions themselves worked to placate the anger and control the rapidly changing narrative of the laundries. An interview with a representative from the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity reveals the internal view of some nuns at the time. She acknowledged that “[t]here are many things that we would feel sorry for,” and suggests that, with hindsight, they would have likely run the institutions differently.[70] Ultimately, though, she ascribes the treatment to simply a product of the time. With pressure directly on the Church, their response was to portray the laundries as misguided results of historical circumstance, offering vague acknowledgement of fault but ultimately refusing to take full responsibility. The Church’s attempts at curbing public outrage were largely unsuccessful on all fronts, partially due to the State’s silence on the matter, leaving the general public with an attitude of mistrust towards the Church. As Ireland moved into the twenty-first century, the Church’s moral authority had decreased

---

67 Eilis O’Hanlon, “Humbug and a flurry of unfocused moral outrage,” *Sunday Independent (Dublin)*, September 19, 1993, 15.

68 Patricia Redlich, “Last respects paid to society’s lost souls,” *Sunday Independent (Dublin),* September 25, 1993, 4.

69 Redlich, “Last respects paid to society’s lost souls,” 4.

70 Star Reporter, “Nuns ‘Sorry’ Now Over Magdalens,” *The Star (Dublin)*, September 13, 1993, 13.

significantly, cemented by an increasing separation between the Church and the public on matters involving gender and sexuality.[71]

Conclusion

Despite the closure of the final laundry in 1996, the systems of containment and social paranoia still exist. As Ireland has secularized in the twenty-first century, public anxieties and notions of an Irish identity have become detached from the authority of the Church, yet remain connected to the control of female bodies. Contemporary fears surrounding a "pure" Irish identity have been projected onto immigrant mothers and their children. Where twentieth-century Irish Catholic fears deemed "fallen women" and illegitimacy as threats to the moral purity of the nation, immigrant bodies now threaten the perceived purity of an Irish national identity. The 2004 Citizenship Referendum, which revoked birthright citizenship from children with non-Irish parents, reasserts a notion of national control through women's bodies and reproduction.[72] Control over national reproductive trends is now defended through secular nationalism, rather than through religious moral concerns.

In this way, the Magdalene laundries were not unprecedented institutions that suddenly appeared in Ireland, nor do they remain in its history. They emerged from centuries of gendered carceral practices and developed into a wider institutional system that allowed for the moral regulation of female behavior. The enduring nature of the laundries was due not to a single actor, but to a misogyny ingrained in the formation of the country that was embedded in practices of the Church, State, and Irish society. The closure of the last laundry in 1996 did not see the automatic disappearance of these structures, but rather their evolution. While the authority of the Catholic Church has decreased substantially, the use of women's bodies in the construction of a modern Irish identity has persisted.[73] Ireland's "architecture of containment" manifests today less as a tool for regulating women's morality, but rather as a framework used to regulate the boundaries of who counts as Irish.

Mikaela Mueller is a recent graduate of History and Literature at UNC Asheville. She is planning to pursue further education in history and teaching after traveling in Europe and Asia.

71 Gerry O'Hanlon, "The Catholic Church in Ireland Today," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 106, no. 421 (2017): 11.
72 Lentin, "a woman died: abortion and the politics of birth in Ireland," 131.
73 Lentin, "a woman died: abortion and the politics of birth in Ireland," 130.

Assassins, Heathens, and the East: How "Exoticization" in Medieval Travelogues Bridged the Gap Between Crusading and

Dillon Page
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

Abstract: Via primary source analysis of late medieval travelogues from the likes of Marco Polo and Mandeville, the following essay intends to illustrate how their characterizations of foreign groups like the Mongols or Assassins create conceptual boxes that facilitate early modern processes of Orientalism and Colonialism. By elevating notions of the fantastical in efforts to entertain readers of travelogues, these authors inadvertently craft notions of the East as a land rife with the 'exotic,' informing a continuity between late medieval understandings of the East and early modern conceptions of the 'Orient.' The result is notions of various groups being defined by Western perceptions rather than the groups themselves, creating a call-to-action for these groups to reclaim their narratives.

Introduction

The *Estoire d'Eracles* records that Count Henry of Champagne, the future king of Jerusalem, visited the infamous Nizari Ismaili, or 'Assassins,' only to witness them voluntarily commit suicide in a show of utmost obedience to their master, 'The Old Man of the Mountain.'[1] Produced in the early thirteenth century as a spiritual successor to William of Tyre's *Historia*, the *Estoire d'Eracles* fulfilled a greater demand among Christian Europeans than solely chronicling the peoples of lands newly exposed to them via the Crusading movements.[2] Instead, as described by Shayne Legassie, it also served a definitive function of 'naturalizing and disassembling' via their embellishments in the 'foreign' as the eternally exotic, a process largely known in medieval scholarship as 'exoticization.'[3] The *Estoire* is just one example from an emergent genre of writing related to travel, Crusades, and encounters with 'exotic' people. Initially taking the form of histories and pilgrimage itineraries, conflicts with Mongols and Turks in the thirteenth century necessitated broadening the scope of these written works into

1 Meriem Pagès, *From Martyr to Murderer: Representations of the Assassins in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Europe* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 106.
2 Pagès, *From Martyr to Murderer*, 105.
3 Shayne Legassie, *The Medieval Invention of Travel* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 21.

Travelogues. Narratives featuring intrepid explorers such as Venetian merchant Marco Polo and fictitious knight Sir John Mandeville abounded, going beyond even Saracen lands to capture the strange and wonderful 'heathen' peoples of the far East.[4] These narratives emerged amidst a significant shift in relations with 'foreign' people for Europeans and broadly the West, as efforts to physically impose control via Crusading began to wane in effectiveness, proven by King Louis IX of France's lackluster Seventh Crusade[5] and failure to secure the Mongols as an ally against the Saracens.[6] Therefore, alternative modes of exerting influence over foreign adversaries via crafting Western-based global frameworks and narratives were necessary to pacify insecure Western polities, whose prominence on the world stage was increasingly challenged.

Travel narratives emerging in the late medieval context were not coincidental, for they do not merely serve to entertain, but, as described by Shayne Legassie, served to 'exoticize' foreign peoples. Shayne captures this process best when quoting Said's *Orientalism*: "exoticism is an aesthetic mode that reifies cultural difference in ways that alternatively naturalize and disassemble the violent foundations of imperial hegemony: the exotic replaces the impress of power with the blandishments of curiosity."[7] While written with the historical context of nineteenth-century colonialism in mind, the central idea of 'exoticism' as a passive form of 'naturalizing and disassembling' those deemed 'foreign' applies to Medieval travel narratives as well, emerging as an alternative modality for 'Crusading' when physical means continued to fail in the thirteenth century. The characterization of the Assassins, the people of the 'Near East', and the people of the 'Far East' in Travelogues shaped perceptions of these groups within the European imagination. Further, it set the stage for them to be narrativized by Western powers amidst future processes of Orientalism and Colonization. Travelogues, therefore, bridge the gap between Crusade-based interactions with 'foreign' groups and later processes of Colonialism by creating a framework for how the 'foreign' are to be perceived, with the resultant alienation informing an ideological imperative to conquer these peoples via their assimilation to Christendom and Western valuations.

'Naturalize and disassemble' is a central component of this essay's argument, and as such is necessary to define. Working with Said's definition, it is the process of placing groups into conceptual boxes and defining them based on

4 For a more detailed discussion on the origins of Medieval Travelogues than this essay can provide, see Zumthor, Paul, and Catherine Peebles, "The Medieval Travel Narrative," *New Literary History* 25, no. 4 (1994): 809–24.

5 Lasting from 1248-54, this is largely regarded as the last major Crusader Campaign.

6 Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismailis* (I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1994), 60.

7 Legassie, *The Medieval Invention of Travel*, 21-22.

arbitrary characteristics deemed important to Europeans. In effect, it is a process of translating groups from what they are toward something that better conforms to European conceptions and narratives. It morphs them into static entities, understood via generalizations and stereotypes. To clarify, this is not a process of control. It will be seen that many Travelogues embellish the power and prestige that foreign groups like the Mongols held. Instead, it is a framework that leaves them vulnerable to being controlled by later processes of racial hierarchy, colonialism, and violent resource extraction. By making them definable under a Western framework, they become controllable under Western hegemony.

Theoretical Framework and Literature: Functions of the 'Exotic'

The following essay's argument is not intended to accuse European 'travelers' of going out of their way to intentionally deprive foreign groups of their own narrative. Instead, this is a process they are participating in by the very nature in which they inadvertently 'exoticize' groups like the Assassins. There is a myriad of motivations dependent on the writer of each travelogue. As such, the essay is not trying to assert this is each writer's motivation but is instead a broader historical process they were participants in, whether they realized it or not. The following section intends to elucidate on the nature of the 'exoticization' process via a review of the same travelogue scholarship that simultaneously serves as a theoretical framework for this essay. The literature on medieval travelogues discussed in the following section is fairly recent, with much of it grounded in the ideas introduced by Said's *Orientalism.* Generally, the vast majority of scholarship after Said agrees that 'exoticization' of foreign peoples is an existing process in late medieval travel narratives. The primary source of differentiation is in what function 'exoticization' serves for both the writer and the European elites who predominantly consume their work.[8] This essay intends to contribute to that literature by proposing another function that 'exoticization' serves, and that is to create a European-based conceptual framework for 'foreign' peoples that facilitates later notions of the 'Orient.' That is not to say the functions proposed by other scholars are incorrect; instead, they can exist in tandem with the function proposed here.

As acknowledged earlier, Said's *Orientalism,* first published in 1978, serves as the foundation for much of the medieval travelogue scholarship concerned with how 'foreign' people are depicted.[9] However, Said's discussions of the 'Orient' are largely separated from a medieval context, instead fixated on nineteenth and twentieth-century imperialist processes. His chosen historical context is based on how he defines 'Orientalism' as either "anyone who teaches,

---

8 I clarify that 'elites' are the target audience, as realistically, only the wealthy would have been capable of both reading/writing and having the resources or time to read these travelogues.

9 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

writes about, or researches the Orient" or "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[10] Both definitions, one based in academic institutions and the other in the militaristic domination of the Orient, are irrelevant to medieval travelogues, which served alternate functions such as entertaining or informing a European audience curious about these 'foreign' lands and people.[11] Instead, Medieval Travelogues must be engaged in an alternate process that is a precursor to proper 'Orientalism.' Said acknowledged how the late medieval writings of figures like Mandeville perpetuated "a restricted number of typical encapsulations" of the 'foreign,' whether that be "the journey, the history, the fable, the stereotypes: these are the lenses through which the Orient is experienced."[12] Travel accounts did not intend to dominate or study the Orient, but instead perpetuated a particular worldview based in Europe that would stifle alternate manners of understanding people deemed 'foreign.' Kim Phillips critiqued Said's notion of perceiving the 'foreign' in *Before Orientalism*, arguing it was not a relationship of pure domination as in Said's definition of 'Orientalism,' but instead one of curiosity that invoked a variety of responses.[13] It is both the ideas introduced in Said's work and these emergent critiques that laid the groundwork for scholarship on 'exoticization' as a harbinger of the 'Orient,' establishing the necessary conceptual biases for 'Orientalism' as a study and a form of domination.

Another relevant piece of scholarship that offers a broader historical scope than Said is Jack Goody's 2006 book, *The Theft of History.*[14] As the title implies, this piece discusses how the West has fundamentally captured historical understanding, making Western bias inescapable.[15] To illustrate how funda-

10 Said, *Orientalism*, 2-3.

11 The rest of this section will delve further into alternative functions these medieval travelogues served. As for the origins of Said's definition of 'Orientalism,' the earliest it can be traced back to is the 1312 Church Council of Vienne where a series of chairs were established to study "Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac at Paris, Oxford, Bologna, Avignon, and Salamanca." Medieval travelogues were not attempting to apply any semblance of academic rigor toward understanding 'foreign' people and as such, cannot be 'Oriental' pieces based on Said's definition. See Said, *Orientalism,* 49-50.

12 He goes on to claim that this particular Eurocentric lens shapes "the language, perception, and form of the encounter between East and West." It is the social construction of a duality that are opposing forces. See Said, *Orientalism,* 58.

13 Kim Phillips, *Before Orientalism: Asian peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 12.

14 Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

15 To clarify, these are modern conceptions of 'The West' formulated amidst the 17th – 18th century processes of global colonialism and imperialism. This conception of a united 'West' did not exist in the late medieval period. Instead, this essay is meant to illustrate how formulations of the 'exotic' in that period then led into what Jack Goody

mental such a bias is, he uses examples like how "the very calculation of time in the past, and in the present too, has been appropriated by the West" through its being structured by before and after the birth of Christ.[16] He also explains the motivation behind Western societies crafting history in their image, claiming it is characteristic of human efforts to "impose their own story on the wider world" as a consequence of them having the power to follow an "egocentric impulse at the basis of much human perception."[17] As for the relevance to 'exoticization,' Goody introduces the widespread consequences of Western bias and its capacity to shape understanding in a manner skewed away from alternative modalities of knowledge. For instance, imagine a world where history was structured around the birth of Muhammad rather than Christ. Such a conception feels wrong and 'foreign' today because it goes against a long history of interpreting the world through a Western lens: a trend that is arguably enforced by how the 'foreign' are conceptualized in travelogues.

Using the postcolonial framework of Said's *Orientalism,* Kim Phillip's 2014 *Before Orientalism* formalizes an emergent field of medieval postcolonial theory, which she dubs precolonial.[18] The distinction which necessitates a 'precolonial' label is that "not all of Latin Christendom's encounters with other peoples were driven by a colonialist impulse," allowing for a vision of the Far East "that admitted neutrality and often admiration as well as critique."[19] It is from their responses to Far East exposure that particular perceptual characteristics of 'foreign' groups were disseminated, establishing a predecessor to what would become the 'Orient' under a European gaze.[20] She also challenges

---

discusses in *The Theft of History* regarding the West's appropriation of historical understanding. This Western bias also affects how contemporary people understand the late medieval period via artificial binaries between 'east' and 'west' that were non-existent at the time.

16 Even if the terminology in academic circles has shifted from strictly BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini), the birth of Jesus Christ as a focal point for historical time persists into the modern day, demonstrating the incredible extent to which historical understanding is still rooted in western tradition. Goody, *The Theft of History*, 14.

17 Goody, *The Theft of History,* 13.

18 Postcolonial theory itself she defines as taking "awareness of the inequality and injustice inherent in relations in any given colonial context as its starting point" for analysis. It is a framework championed by Said and what is largely the theoretical basis for this essay and the scholarship it is based in. Hence why this scholarship section begins with Said rather than earlier analysis of medieval travel narratives or the conception of the 'Orient' that were bereft of postcolonial analysis. See Phillips, *Before Orientalism,* 5-6.

19 Phillips, *Before Orientalism,* 5-6.

20 This is summed up best when Kim asserts that "Ultimately, late medieval writings on distant Easts are pre-Orientalist primarily because they are precolonialist," meaning a pre colonialist gaze informs a perception of the Far East that is not properly

Said's binary of a "submissive, feminine East to the masterful, masculine West," asserting "Europeans were conscious of the much greater military might, economic force, and social organization found in various Eastern contexts," such as the Mongols.[21] Overall, Kim challenges Said by critiquing his concepts within Medieval contexts, crafting an argument similar to the one established in this paper. Unlike *Before Orientalism,* though, this analysis will be primarily based on medieval travelogues and will examine both the Near and Far East. [22] Regardless, her piece demonstrates that relating Late Medieval narratives to the formation of the 'Orient' is an existing idea within the literature being explored.

Instead of suggesting that travel narratives functioned solely as a signifier of Oriental frameworks, Shayne Legassie argues in his 2017 book *The Medieval Invention of Travel* that medieval travel established a 'Prestige Economy' for the traveler. Wherein the traveler's "association with the foreign" allowed them to "accrue social, political, and economic advantage" over their peers.[23] The prestige associated with medieval travelers is rooted in "the association of travel with asceticism" that influential organizations like Churches and polities utilized to defend pilgrimages as acts of absolution for one's sins.[24] Asceticism itself, or the intentional deprivation of comfort to demonstrate religious purity, was common in a time of increased Christian fervor and aligned with the struggle that travel naturally entailed when journeys could take weeks or months on horseback. Shayne also highlights Anthropologist Mary W. Helm's research, which found that "nearly all preindustrial societies" had overlap in their geographical and cosmological studies, resulting in an association between "the act of overcoming geographical distance" and "the powers of the sacred."[25] Travel was therefore imparted with a sense of divinity and, by proxy, prestige via the labor traveling long distances entailed. That prestige is evidenced by illustrations like those created for an edition of Marco Polo's *Travels* published after 1333.[26] It depicts Nicholas and Maffeo Polo, the father and uncle of Marco Polo, sailing for the Black Sea after visiting the Emperor Baldwin and receiving

---

'Orient' due to a lack of colonialist intent. Instead, it is 'Pre-Orientalism' that will set up the groundwork for what the 'Orient' is understood to be. Phillips, *Before Orientalism,* 15.

21 Phillips, *Before Orientalism,* 59.

22 Kim only examined 'Orientalism' "in relation to Asian regions beyond the Middle East," meaning her book would be more appropriately titled *Alongside Orientalism* as the 'Orient' is traditionally understood within Islamic contexts. See Phillips, *Before Orientalism,* 17.

23 Legassie, *The Medieval Invention of Travel,* 22.

24 Legassie, *The Medieval Invention of Travel,* 8.

25 Legassie, *The Medieval Invention of Travel,* 21-22.

26 Anonymous, *Nicholas, and Marco Polo*. *Medieval Travel Writing*, The British Library, 1333, https://www.medievaltravel.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Detail/nicholas-and-marco-polo/19365302?item=19365321.

blessings from the Patriarch. The Polos demonstrated how the labor of travel imparts prestige by emphasizing their interactions with prestigious figures before their travels. As such, travel serves a purpose not just for the audience of these narratives but for the traveler to meet influential figures and garner social influence. In terms of relating the 'prestige economy' to travel narratives' propensity to exoticize, it demonstrates the incredible authority travelers acquired in the medieval world. Travel narratives are imparted with credibility as their ascetic quality "proved a valuable rhetorical resource to defenders and critics of various modes of medieval travel", allowing their depictions of the 'foreign' to be considered accurate rather than fanciful.[27] Travel narratives, therefore, have the power to shape understandings of lands never seen by the average medieval European, creating a narrative of the 'exotic' for them to follow, blissfully ignorant of the true reality of these far-off lands.

The Nizari Ismaili, Assassins, or Hasashi: A Case Study in the 'Exotic'

The Nizari Ismaili 'Assassins' serve as an apt case study for the phenomenon of 'Exoticization,' with the following section focusing on late medieval European depictions of this elusive foreign group. Emergent descriptive patterns that 'exoticized' the 'Assassins' in Travelogues included an emphasis on their wealth, outlandish practices like the 'death leap,'[28] easy conversion to Christianity, and the quasi-deification of former leader Rashid al-Din Sinan. InThus, by characterizing the Assassins as 'exotic' in Travelogues, Europeans began to 'naturalize and disassemble' them as a part of the broader 'Exoticism' movement that reframed 'foreign' groups into Western European-based conceptions and narratives.

To understand the Assassins as they truly were is a difficult task, for they produced few documents of their own, with the vast majority of contemporary understandings being derived from heavily biased European accoutns. What is known definitively is that the Assassins emerged in modern-day Syria amidst a historic division between Sunni and Shia worshipers of the Islamic faith. Both groups followed the teachings of the *Qur'an* but diverged in their belief regarding who had the authority to enforce these teachings. The Sunni argued that it was the succession of caliphs, whereas the Shia believe it is Muhammad's lineage, known as the *imams*, that holds sway. The beliefs of the Shia evolved in the Middle Ages to incorporate the Fatimid Caliphs in Cairo, who claimed they were the rightful descendants of Muhammad, with various sects emerging to carry on the Fatimids' will. One such group was the Nizari 'Assassins,' who followed "a line of imams stemming from Fatimid prince Nizar," murdered in

27 Legassie, *The Medieval Invention of Travel,* 8.

28 Coined by Farhad Daftary, one of the leading voices in modern scholarship on the Assassins. See Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*, 106.

1096.[29] They were predominantly based "in the mountainous regions of Syria and Persia," where they often interacted with Crusaders due to their proximity to the Latin states.[30] They gained much of their notoriety upon acquiring the fortress of Masayaf in 1140 and later promoting Rāshid al-Dīn Sinān as their organization's figurehead in 1193.[31] While Sinan did cultivate diplomatic relations with nearby Frankish kings, he is largely known for ordering his Assassins to conduct high-profile assassinations of Muslim rulers until he signed "a truce with Saladin before his death."[32] Even still, Christians remained viable targets, with them murdering Raymond, the son of Bohemond IV of Antioch, in 1213, and it was rumored that they also plotted to kill King Louis.[33] It is on this basis that Europeans contrived myriad fantasies about this elusive group.

Evaluating patterns in how Europeans described their initial interactions with the 'Assassins' is necessary so that their use of 'exoticization' in the Travelogues of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries can be better discerned. The first European travelogue to mention the 'Assassins' was Benjamin of Tudella's twelfth-century *Itinerarium,* though it was William of Tyre's 1180 work, *Historia,* that first ignited the European imagination.[34] Chronicling the early history of the Crusades and the actors involved, Tyre briefly describes the Syrian Nizaris as "a tribe of people who possess ten fortresses" of "about sixty thousand or possibly more."[35] Tyre, noting the amount of territory and people under their sway, demonstrates a preoccupation with being descriptive rather than entertaining. Many Europeans, like Tyre, were making efforts to understand groups under the purview of Muslim society, like the Nizari Ismaili, so that they could better resist Muslim encroachment. Peter the Venerable, abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Cluny in France, had a "deep concern for guarding Christianity against heresies" and so journeyed to Spain in 1142 to translate several Islamic texts, like the Quran.[36] Granted, these were not honest attempts

29 Riley-Smith, Jonathan, and Susanna A. Throop, *The Crusades: A History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 31.

30 Aziz Ali Dad, "Crusaders and the Construction of Assassin Myth," (2019): 2.

31 Dad, "Crusaders and the Construction of Assassin Myth," 3.

32 Dad, "Crusaders and the Construction of Assassin Myth," 3.

33 Dad, "Crusaders and the Construction of Assassin Myth," 4.

34 Despite being a major source for early European understandings of the Assassins, Benjamin of Tudela's *Itinerarium* cannot be a source of analysis due to his Jewish identity, placing him outside the contours of this essay, which is primarily focused on European Christian perspectives. Still, it would be a valuable source of future analysis for those wishing to assess how Medieval Jewish voices did or did not participate in 'exoticization' of foreign groups: Benjamin of Tudella, Markus N. Adler, Adolf Asher, and Michael Alan Signer, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages* (Malibu, CA: Joseph Simon/Pangloss Press, 1983), 76.

35 Daftary, *The Assassin Legends,* 70.

36 Daftary, *The Assassin Legends,* 58.

to better understand the faith, as it was done within the framework of elucidating on an enemy or potential convert to the faith. Even Crusade-era thinkers did not understand aspects like “the main sectarian divisions of Islam into Sunni and Shia sects” due to broadly labeling the Islamic world ‘heretical.’[37] Despite how these divisions were essential to the Assassins’ formation, misconceptions continued to define early accounts of the group and served as the foundation for later attempts to ‘exoticize’ them.

Returning to Tyre, he discussed a 1173 incident wherein Assassin leader Sinan hoped to receive concessions from nearby Frankish king Amarlic on heavy tributes levied on the Ismailis. He had an emissary sent over that was unfortunately killed by Templars on his way back to Sinan.[38] Yet in Tyre’s recounting of the event, he asserted that Sinan recognized “the gentle and noble doctrine of Christ” was superior to “the miserable seducer Muhammad,” prompting him to send an embassy to King Amarlic with the promise that if the tribute was remitted, “the race of the Assassins would embrace the faith of Christ and receive baptism.”[39] His description transforms Sinan and his Assassins’ sense of agency, shifting the narrative away from an earnest attempt at enacting diplomatic relations toward an instance of divine revelation that prompted them to revoke their faith. It framed the Assassins as a group on the cusp of conversion, with the death of the embassy on the way back being the sole reason they did not embrace Christianity. Muhammad, akin to the Devil, is a ‘seducer,’ straying the Assassins from the righteous path of Christendom, narrativizing the Assassins as victims of seduction, rather than active agents in the Medieval world.

Any attempt to move past this surface-level understanding of the Assassins was stifled in 1236 when Pope Gregory IX, in a letter to the Archbishop of Tyre and other religious authorities, declared enmity between the Assassins and Christians, enforcing an artificial binary that marked an end to Crusader cooperation with the group.[40] With no avenue for obtaining further knowledge on the group, “Crusaders’ observations remained an observation about the

---

37 Dad, “Crusaders and the Construction of Assassin Myth,” 1-13.

38 Dad, “Crusaders and the Construction of Assassin Myth,” 3.

39 Pagès, *From Martyr to Murderer*, 48-49.

40 To contextualize, the Crusader’s military orders had increased cooperation with the Assassins and other groups local to the Near East. For instance, Arabic speaking friar Yves the Breton accompanied ambassadors of King Louis to meet the Nizari Ismaili’s chief. Yves and the chief discussed Ismaili faith, creating a bridge of understanding albeit an imperfect one as Ismaili concepts were confused with others like the transmigration of the soul and cyclical views of history. Meanwhile the papacy remained adamant in its distaste for all Saracen groups. Observing these attempts at building connections, the papacy deemed it necessary to make an official proclamation that would end cooperation with Saracen groups. For more information, see Dad, “Crusaders and the Construction of Assassin Myth,” 6.

'Others' from the point of 'Us,'" making the group an eternally foreign entity.[41] Further, "by 1256 the Persian Nizari state had collapsed under the onslaught of the Mongols."[42] With their waning authority coinciding with a rise in Medieval Travelogues, the Assassins, with their curious cultural practices, abundance of wealth, and powerful leaders, proved to be particularly susceptible to the formation of a mythos that exoticized them. With their presence diminished, Europeans could now popularize an alternative narrative for the Assassins, not as an equal, but as an oddity existing on the edge of the known world.

As Meriem Pagès highlights, the thirteenth century saw the Assassins become "widespread in 'wonder' literature describing marvelous peoples living at the edges of the known world" that served to both entertain and satiate the curiosity of many Europeans.[43] It commodified their existence into a side-show, a series of legends where separating fact from fiction became ever more dubious. Returning to the *Estoire d'Eracles*, it is one of the first instances of the Assassins being actively exoticized to entertain a prospective European audience:[44]

> "As Count Henry was returning [home], a desire to go see the lord of the Assassins seized him, and he went there. The Old Man welcomed him with great honor, led him throughout his land, and showed him all of his castles. It happened one day that they were in one of his castles, where there was a very high tower at each crenel of which stood a man dressed in white. The Old Man said to the count, 'Lord, your men would not do for you what mine do for me.' The count answered, 'Lord, this may well be.' Then the Old Man cried out to two of those men who were on the tower. Those two threw themselves down and broke their necks. The count was astonished and said to the Old Man that, truly, he had no man who would do such a thing for him. The Old Man, for the honor paid him by the count, took him under his protection against all men and gave him precious jewels. Then the count left, returning to his land."[45]

41 Dad, "Crusaders and the Construction of Assassin Myth," 7.

42 Daftary, *The Assassin Legends,* 107.

43 Pagès, *From Martyr to Murderer*, 104.

44 While it was stated earlier in the essay that Travelogues did not solely serve the function of entertainment (see page 2), that does not mean such a function cannot 'exoticize' in of itself. As this example will demonstrate, to entertain their European audience, travelogue writers will embellish in the fantastical even if it blurs the lines between fact and fiction. Thus, their audience fails to gather an accurate portrait of the group but instead one built to entertain, potentially leading many to see the groups as fantastical and built for European consumption. This risks commodifying 'foreign' groups into objects to later be exploited in the post-medieval period. In sum, to 'entertain' is not a passive process, as these caricatures shape how Europeans perceive these groups and by proxy establish relations with them, resulting in tangible effects.

45 Anonymous, *L'histoire de Eracles empereur et la conqueste de la Terre*

Unlike earlier descriptions like Tyre's, which at least positied an attempt to provide a detailed description, the *Estoire d'Eracles* had no concern with specificity, failing to note how many castles the Assassins showed Count Henry or even the name of the castle where he witnessed the Old Man's demonstration. The clear focus is on the fantastical, namely the 'death leap' that the Assassins perform. It is the resultant obedience with which the Assassins "broke their necks" on his order that proves the Old Man's claim to Henry that "your men would not do for you what mine do for me," marking him as a figure that can command otherworldly obedience from his followers. Ironically enough, the notion that men will obediently kill themselves upon the order of an authority figure is not dissimilar from what the Crusaders were expected to do under the orders of Pope Urban II. Before the First Crusade, Urban II offered ecclesiastical rewards for a Crusader voluntarily giving up their life, claiming that "all who die by the way, whether by land or by sea, or in battle against the pagans, shall have immediate remission of sins."[46] To ignore such a significant continuity in Christendom's history and frame the Assassins' actions as outlandish speaks to a desire to ostracize them, weaponizing religion to craft an artificial motivator of conquest against 'infidels' that distracts from whatever pragmatic goals those like Pope Urban II harbor. The excerpts conclude with the Old Man nonchalantly giving Count Henry "precious jewels," normalizing access to high-value resources amongst groups like the Assassins, making them both desirable and mysterious to a European audience. While having aspects of a travelogue, like descriptions of 'wonder' peoples, the *Estoire d'Eracles* remains primarily a history.

It is not until Marco Polo's *Divisament Dou Monde* that the Assassins become a focal point of exoticization for travel narratives. While serving as Prisoners of war in Genoa, Rustichello da Pisa, a prose epic writer, and Marco Polo decided around 1298 to collaborate on writing the *Divisament Dou Monde,* the most influential travel narrative of all time. It tracks the travels of Marco Polo, his father, and uncle who embarked on a journey in the 1260s via Jerusalem and to the Great Khan's lands in the far East, where they served under Khubilai Khan for some time. The *Divisament* quickly became the premier authority on the people and lands detailed in the 135 manuscripts of it that survive, preserved in a variety of languages, including Venetian, Continental French, Tuscan, and Latin.[47] Such depictions of the Assassins framed how the wider European sphere largely perceived this group. To begin, Polo claims the district the 'Old Man' resided in, named Mulehet, was translated to "the place of heretics" in

d'Outremer In Recueil des historiens des Croisades: Historiens occidentaux, vol. I, pts. 1-2, trans. Meriem Pages edit. l'Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres (Imprimerie royale, 1844, Colbert-Fontainebleau *Eracles*, 1248), 26.28.

46 Allen, S. J., and Emilie Amt, *The Crusades: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2024), 38.

47 Legassie, *The Medieval Invention of Travel*, 39.

the Saracen language, with his people being the "Mulehetities, or holders of heretical tenets."[48] While he is referring to their heretical status amongst Saracens, starting his description of them with a claim of heresy based on their residency and name frames them as innately abnormal to his European audience. Similar to *Estoire d'Eracles*, Polo's description of the Assassins revolves around a fantastical anecdote, with his being the veritable 'Garden of Eden,' "stored with very delicious fruit" and "ornamented with works in gold."[49] He fails to elaborate on how or why the Assassins have access to these riches, serving only to enhance the fantastical nature of the group and, by proxy, their exoticism to readers.[50] Polo asserts that the Assassin's legendary obedience to the 'Old Man' is sourced from the garden itself, as he administers Opium to them, takes them to the Garden where "their senses were struck with all the delightful objects," and then promises that if they follow his orders, "that happy lot awaits you."[51] According to Polo, this manipulation communicates to the Old Man's followers that he "was a prophet and the compeer of Mahomet," not a mere mortal.[52] Not only does this frame his followers as naive for allowing material delights to conduct utmost obedience, but it marks Saren as manipulative and heretical via his claims to divinity as a self-named 'prophet.' They are framed as unreliable entities, committed to strange customs that, to a normative European audience, are alienating. The Assassins had succumbed to becoming merely 'exotic.'

It was by the mid-fourteenth century that the memory of the Assassins as a distinct group faded away, shifting instead to the realm of the purely conceptual for many Europeans. Contemporary writers like Dante Alighieri began using 'Assassin' as a common noun to signify a professional murderer, referring to *le perfido assassin* in the 19th canto of *Il Inferno*.[53] That is where the story of the 'Assassins' ends, relegated to a descriptor. They are the ideal case study for 'Exoticization,' now popularly understood as a term solely defined by the fantastical high-profile assassinations European writers focused on, creating a perception of bloodthirsty 'infidels' that are positioned to be persecuted and alienated by Europeans.[54] Such a one-dimensional framing of them made it so that any actions taken against them, or Muslim groups broadly,

48 Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo. Edited with an Introd. by Milton Rugoff*, Edit. by Milton Rugoff (New York: New American Library, 1961), 73.

49 Marco Polo, *The Travels,* 73

50 Now, due to the portrayals of the Assassins largely being from Western perspectives, the true amount of riches this group harbored is unknown. It was certainly not insignificant, as demonstrated by their having the resources to operate in multiple countries and kill high-profile targets.

51 Marco Polo, *The Travels,* 75

52 Marco Polo, *The Travels,* 74

53 Daftary, *The Assassin Legends,* 121.

54 1265-1321, Dante was a renowned Italian poet famous for writing *La Divina Commedia*.

can be justified by their purportedly savage nature. This section charted how a group once engaged in diplomatic relations with European powers was subsequently dissolved and transfigured into a mere ‘curiosity’ existent at the edge of the world. ‘Curiosity’ refers to a group alienated as non-normative and denied the platform to define themselves or their legacy. Shifting from individual to regional analysis, the next chapters will chart patterns of ‘exoticization’ across various regional groups rather than the increased ‘exoticization’ of a single group over time. It is the resultant generalizations created about these groups that ‘naturalize and disassemble’ their influence.

Muslims, Heathens, or Saracens: The ‘Exotic’ of the Near East

Returning to Marco Polo, in the thirteenth chapter of his *Divisament,* he comes across the city of Saba, wherein the Three Magi of biblical fame are buried. Alas, “nobody could tell him anything about them except that the three were buried in ancient times.”[55] While their graves remained destitute, pagan fire-worshippers inhabited the nearby Castle Palasata. They worship a stone aflame, a testament to the Three Magi’s failure to “remain as firm as a stone in the faith they had received” from God.[56] Through anecdotes like this, Polo illustrates a distorted ‘Near East,’ whereby the familiar elements of Biblical legend are forgotten and replaced by something new and ‘Exotic’ under Saracen rule. It created an impetus for Travelogues to elucidate upon a land made ‘foreign’ to Europeans as they continued to lose more of their territory in the Near East to the Saracens, culminating in the fall of Acre in 1291, which marked the end of Crusader hegemony in the region.[57] Now they were confronted with a new reality of an “expanding, dynamic Muslim civilization” that they needed to make sense of, informing active attempts to understand these ‘exotic’ people, formerly discounted as enemies of God.[58] Similar to the Nizari Ismaili, various patterns emerge in how these people of the Near East were characterized that ‘naturalized and disassembled’ their growing influence in the region via ‘Exoticization.’ This included a focus on supposed practices like anthropophagy

55 Marco Polo, *The Travels,* 61

56 Marco Polo, *The Travels,* 62

57 To elaborate, the Mamluk Kingdom emerged under Sultan Baybars I (1260-1277) and managed to push back the Mongol incursion in the 1260 Battle of ‘Ayn Jalut. Now that the Mongols were no longer a threat, he stabilized Egypt and Syria into a centralized and powerful state that could take up the fight against the Frankish territories in the region. Various Templar fortresses fell, including Antioch in 1268. Acre was the last line of defense for the Franks, and it too fell in 1291 to Sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf Khalil (1290-1293). Now Europeans were no longer working to acquire territory but instead to defend their own. See Peter Thorau, “The Crusades,” In G. Melville (ed.), *Brill’s Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages Online*, (2016) for more context on the Crusading Movements generally.

58 John Victor Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xiv.

that defied Christian conventions, the immense power behind the Sultans of the region, the imposition of monstrous qualities upon the region's people, and a continued focus on their potential for Christian conversion. These qualities were not necessarily imposed to control Near East groups but to create popular categorizations and narratives in a manner bereft of nuance or accuracy, creating damaging perceptions that would remain into the colonial period.[59]

Characterizations of Muslim society, even after the fall of Acre, continued to carry a sense of cosmological enmity that colored future depictions of them in Travelogues.[60] It is rooted in the term 'Saracen', often used to reference them, that signifies they are associated with the "Ishmaelite descendants of Abraham by Hagar" rather than the chosen descendants of Abraham by his other wife, Sarah.[61] Additionally, descriptors of these people as 'Islam'[62] or 'Muslims' were largely unknown to Medieval Christian writers; instead, they understood them via ethnic terms such as Arabs, Turks, and Moors.[63] As such, they are viewed as less of a religious group composed of people from diverse origins, but instead as races or ethnicities with particular features that made them readily identifiable to a Medieval European. Once differences were reified into the fundamentally human realm rather than mere differences in religious opinion, it could be used to create an order of rank wherein Medieval Europeans were human and the Saracens became subhuman. Since the "picture of Islam was fabricated at a time of great imaginative development in Western Europe," fantastical descriptions of these people reigned supreme.[64] Amongst some Europeans, for instance, it was asserted Muslims practiced Anthropophagy, "both the human and non-human consumption of human flesh," which is distinct from Cannibalism in how it also encompasses the consumption of hybrid creatures

---

59 That is to say, there were no genuine attempts to "accurately" portray Islamic cultures and even study their proficiencies in the arts, mathematics, and astrology. Granted, this interest waned in the middle of the thirteenth century and gave way to a general sense of enmity. See Daftary, *The Assassin Legends,* 58.

60 That is to say, Christians and Muslims were seen as opposed entities cosmologically. While Christian's were viewed as morally righteous agents of God, the Saracens were seen as spawns of Satan and Devils in a literal sense. As such, the Crusades were true Holy Wars, narrativized as God taking back the Holy Land from the demons who have occupied it. It is this framework that continued to cast influence on how Saracens were depicted even centuries after the last crusades in the region ended.

61 Granted, such an association is largely erroneous since they should then not be called Saracens, literally 'sons of Sarah.' A more accurate term would be 'Ishmaelites.' Brede (d. 735) was the Biblical scholar of the early Middle Ages who spread this incorrect notion, according to Daftary, *The Assassin Legends,* 51.

62 'Islam' in Arabic means "submission to God's will," a religious etymology unknown to Medieval Europeans. See Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, xv.

63 Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, xv.

64 Daftary, *The Assassin Legends,* 57.

like giants or Cyclopes.[65] Not only are they associated with these monstrous practices, but it is also common for them to acquire monstrous features via the act, often bearing the "heads or faces of dogs" in many Medieval European writings.[66] In sum, while Saracens did bear the brunt of being understood as subhuman before Travelogues emerged in the thirteenth century, it was not until they acquired regional hegemony that they became properly 'exoticized.' To illustrate this process, it is necessary to analyze how one of the most popular Travelogues depicted the people of the Near East: Mandeville's *Travels*.

Mandeville's *Travels,* which "became an instant best-seller second only to the Bible itself," records the travels of the Knight Mandeville, who started his journey in 1322 and returned to England by 1356, having gone so far East that he had entered the lands of the Great Khan.[67] At least, that is how the story goes. It is largely contested if Sir John Mandeville even existed, with many modern scholars arguing it was an English courtier named Jean de Bourgogne who wrote the book, despite having never traveled to the places Mandeville purportedly did.[68] Therefore, it can be claimed that Mandeville's *Travels* is less an expression of historical reality than but instead of historical perception, demonstrating what the Medieval European populace believed these foreign lands looked like. Further, how those lands exist in the growing framework of the 'Exotic' in the European imagination.

Mandeville begins his travels in the 'Holy Land', which he describes as "the most worthy land, most excellent, and Lady and Sovereign of all other lands" due to its association with Christ, demonstrating a clear theological bent in his perspective that is more prevalent than even the likes of Marco Polo.[69] He then goes on to issue a call to action for his readers, asking "every good Christian that has the power and the ability" to "use all his strength to take back

65 According to Heather Blurton who wrote *Cannibalism,* "far more than any other group in the European Middle Ages, it is the Muslim– or rather the Saracen of imaginative literature– who is accused of Cannibalism." Granted, Anthropophagy is a more appropriate term as the word 'cannibal' did not appear until Christopher Columbus wrote about it in his 1492 journal. See Phillips, *Before Orientalism*, 89-90.

66 Phillips, *Before Orientalism,* 90.

67 John Mandeville and E. C. Coleman, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (London: Nonsuch, 2006), 9-10.

68 There are various pieces of evidence presented to support the idea that Mandeville did not exist. For instance, the details of his birth are murky, having been born "at an unknown date at St Albans, England." Furthermore, the coat of arms on Mandeville's tomb closely resembled those of the Tyrell and Lamont families. Mandeville was written about in the 1396 *Chronicles of Meaux Abbey* and the 1400 *Annals of St Albans* as a famous traveler, suggesting he did at least exist in popular imagination. The following evidence is sourced from: Mandeville, *The Travels,* 12.

69 Mandeville, *The Travels,* 17.

our rightful heritage and drive out all disbelievers" from the 'Holy Land.'[70] Mandeville's desire to drive out the heathen Saracens from holy sites (i.e., Jerusalem) was a traditionalist Crusader ethos that became the foundation for a travelogue which perpetuated the 'exoticism' of these Near Eastern people, indicating the historical continuity between these two elements.[71]

After traveling through Constantinople, he arrived in Babylon, where the Sultan lived. He relates an anecdote wherein the Sultan insisted he could become "married to one of his Princess daughters" if he forsake his Christian beliefs, but he refuses.[72] It is this characterization of the 'Exotic' as a temptation which persists throughout the travelogue, where only those of the mightiest spiritual character can resist the Saracen's whims.[73] Mandeville then discusses the history of Sultanship, emphasizing how each was made "Sultan by his strength," beginning with the first Sultan, Saracon of Mede, who became Sultan after he slew the Caliph of Egypt. He then goes on to frame ascendancy to Sultanship as a matter of who happens to slay the current Sultan, listing Melechemes, a commoner, becoming Sultan after slaying Tympieman. Then subsequently Melechemes was slain by Bendochdare, who then became the new Sultan and renamed himself Melechdare.[74] Rather than intellect or merit as a qualifier for Sultanship, it is instead bloodshed that Mandeville uses to frame ascendancy to one of the highest positions in Saracen society. This implies Saracen society is defined by these tenets of violence and strength, if it colours the history of Sultanship to such an extent. Despite these negative descriptors of the Sultan, Mandeville was not afraid to emphasize the power the Muslim ruler held. He noted that the Sultan could lead twenty thousand men out of Egypt as his army, enjoyed the company of four wives, and always left visitors to his lands "richer and more glad in departing than when he first came before."[75] Noting the power behind the Sultanship itself contributes to the formation of the 'Exotic' as it

70 Mandeville, *The Travels,* 18.

71 To prove this connection between Mandeville and the Crusading ethos, look at the similarities in how Pope Urban II, in his 1095 call for the first Crusade, described the Holy Land as "flowing with milk and honey" before the "pollution of paganism" degenerated holy cities like Jerusalem. They also exist in a similar context, wherein the 'Holy Land' was now under the occupation of Saracens and not European Christians; S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt, *The Crusades: A reader*, 39-41.

72 Mandeville, *The Travels,* 48.

73 The 'Exotic' as a form of temptation has an interesting connection to Shayne's concept of medieval travel as a form of "literate labor" which challenged the traveler both physically and intellectually. According to Legassie, this is a reinvention of the classical ideal of a heroic figure achieving "self-mastery in the face of bodily temptation and travail" which is what Mandeville performed by resisting the whims of the Sultan's princess daughter: Legassie, *The Medieval Invention of Travel*, viii.

74 Mandeville, *The Travels,* 48-49.

75 Mandeville, *The Travels,* 50-51.

mystifies prospective European readers, creating a sense of power alienated from reality that instead leans into the fantastical. Mandeville's description of the Sultanship is ultimately an encapsulation of what these exotic narratives meant to the Medieval European, illustrating strange foreign modes of life in combination with incredible power and wealth that commodify these people as ever 'foreign' from what the Medieval European understands as normalcy.[76]

When traveling through the Egyptian city of Heliopolis, Mandeville encounters the legendary Phoenix, renowned for its ability to burn itself to ashes every five hundred years and then emerge renewed.[77] One of the more notable aspects of Mandeville's *Travels* is the various creatures, like the Phoenix, that adorn his descriptions. They are worthy of note for this essay in that they serve to emphasize the 'Exoticism' of these lands via how they blur the line between reality and the fantastical. It is also the Saracens' proximity to these creatures, including practices of worshipping them, like we see with the Pagan preachers of Heliopolis and the Phoenix. that emphasizes their 'Exoticism' by association with the fantastical. It is through this association that the people of these 'foreign' lands inherit the qualities of monsters themselves.[78]

Returning to Mandeville's *Travels*, he goes on to critique Saracen belief systems in later chapters and, resultantly indicates how late Medieval Europeans broadly framed their cosmological understanding of Islam. Despite his willingness to liken the Saracens to 'Heathens,' Mandeville attempts to create a connection by asserting "they come so near to our faith."[79] Yet that connection was not an honest moment of cultural exchange, but instead served to justify his claim that "they are easily converted to the Christian Law when men preach to them and show them clearly the Law of Jesus Christ and tell them of the proph-

---

76 To demonstrate the prevalence of this 'exotic characterization, look back to how the Assassins were characterized. Yes, they had disconcerting customs like the 'Death Leap' and use of drugs, but they also had incredible power in the Medieval world as proven by their power over the lives of even kings via high-profile assassinations and the material wealth the 'Old Man of the Mountain' purportedly held (see page 6 for further details).

77 Known as the 'city of the sun' according to Mandeville. See Mandeville, *The Travels,* 56-57.

78 The discussion of Anthropophagy on pg. 11 also references how monstrous qualities are given to the 'exotic' when those who engaged in the practice were depicted with dog-heads to emphasize their lack of humanity.

79 He points out a couple of similarities between Christianity and Islam as evidence. These include their shared belief that God conceived Jesus Christ in the Virgin Mary, that "the word of God has great strength," that some form of the annunciation occurred between God's angel and Mary, and that between Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, and Mahomet, it was Jesus who "was the worthiest and the most excellent and the greatest." Mandeville, *The Travels,* 134.

ecies."[80] For Mandeville, it is a question of willpower wherein the Saracens, due to having a weaker form of faith, easily succumb to indoctrination toward Christianity once shown proof of its validity.[81] Meanwhile, he and his Christian peers are taught to better endure temptations toward alternate modes of faith by virtue of Christianity being the only correct way to understand the cosmological universe. In sum, the Saracens, "like the Jews, understand only the letter and not the Spirit" of religious law.[82] Claiming the Saracens do not follow Christianity out of ignorance of the 'Spirit' behind the letters of the gospel frames religious differences as a misunderstanding of the one true Christian doctrine rather than their independent entities. It deprives the Saracens of the agency to follow their religion and for it to be understood within their context. Instead, it is in constant comparison to Christianity, seen as a defect in the truth that must be remedied. Therefore, to Medieval Europeans like Mandeville, Islam is just an 'exoticized' form of Christianity rather than an independent belief system.[83] It is the fact that it can only be understood through a Christian framework that 'naturalizes' its power as a valid religion, making its adherents merely ignorant 'exotics' rather than differentiated.[84] On that note, John Mandeville closes his discussion

---

80 Mandeville, *The Travels,* 133.

81 Yet another avenue of comparison to the Assassins emerges here via William of Tyre's anecdote on pg. 4 wherein he framed it so that the Assassin's leader 'The Old Man' easily converted to Christianity upon learning of the "gentle and noble doctrine of Christ," demonstrating a lack of will power on his part to remain steadfast in his Nizari Ismaili belief system. This demonstrates how patterns of 'exoticization' can persist across various groups.

82 Mandeville, *The Travels,* 135.

83 This line of argumentation is corroborated in Said's *Orientalism:* "If the mind must suddenly deal with what it takes to be a radically new form of life-as Islam appeared to Europe in the early Middle Ages-the response on the whole is conservative and defensive. Islam is judged to be a fraudulent new version of some previous experience, in this case Christianity. The threat is muted, familiar values impose themselves, and in the end the mind reduces the pressure upon it by accommodating things to itself as either 'original' or 'repetitious.' Islam thereafter is 'handled': its novelty and its suggestiveness are brought under control so that relatively nuanced discriminations are now made that would have been impossible had the raw novelty of Islam been left unattended." Said, *Orientalism,* 59.

84 The 'naturalization' of Saracen belief systems is not unique to Mandeville, but is a pattern persistent across many Travelogue accounts. For instance, Benedict the Pole (b. Late 13th century – d. 1339/40) was a Spanish Franciscan friar who traveled into Mongol territory for missionary work. In a letter, composed a year before his death, he discusses his efforts to convert Saracens dwelling in Mongol territory. They resisted him heavily, casting him into the water, offering him poison, and beating him up. Yet, according to Benedict, he reigned victorious and "at last even they, in spite of their reluctance, had to admit its truth," demonstrating the superiority of Christianity over Islam and its ability to 'naturalize and disassemble' adherents to that religion. Romano, *Medieval Travel and Travelers: A Reader*, 103-104.

on the people of the 'Near East', disseminating an 'exoticized' formation of these people to a large Medieval European audience. The Saracens, too, had succumbed to becoming eternally 'exotic.' While the groups of the 'Near East' have been established in European understanding for centuries, it is the next section that tackles a suddenly emergent group which would also be framed within the confines of the 'exotic' by Europeans: those people of the Far East, particularly the Mongols.

Mongols, Tartars, or Indians: The 'Exotic' of the Far East

Whereas the Assassins and Saracens were entities long existent in the Medieval European imagination, the Mongols were "virtually unknown in Latin Christendom until about the mid-thirteenth century."[85] That is, until their "military campaigns into Russia and Eastern Europe" not only threatened Europe's stability but were so violent that they were imparted with the name 'Tartars' to associate them with Tartarus, or Hell.[86] Herein lies a contradiction for Medieval Europeans, as paradise was generally understood to reside in the Far East, as signified by the T-O World Map they commonly utilized.[87] At the top lies Asia, the Far Eastern continent, above Europe, suggesting its greater proximity to paradise. The contradiction between the Far East as a paradisal locale versus its inhabitants being labeled devils spurred a central mystery for Latin Christendom that needed to be solved. Especially since early thirteenth-century Mongol invasions also targeted Islamic territories, meaning they could potentially be a valuable ally against Christendom's greatest enemy: the Saracens.[88]

Seizing the opportunity in 1245, Pope Innocent IV sent a series of letters to Guyuk Khan, the current Mongol leader, demanding that they cease the unremitted "persecution of Christians" amidst their conquests.[89] Further, he sent Friar Laurence of Portugal to facilitate leading "those in error into the way

85 Iain Macleod Higgins, *Writing East: The "Travels" of Sir John Mandeville* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 159.
86 Higgins, *Writing East,* 159.
87 The 'T-O' name derives from the 'T' in the center and circular 'O' surrounding it, being the most common representation of the globe in Medieval Europe. The 'T' is the Mediterranean Sea which divides the three continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa into sectors encircled by the 'O' which is the ocean. Each continent bears the name of one of Noah's sons, who was thought to have populated each area of the world "after the biblical flood." Perhaps this is suggesting Christian ownership of the globe. See Romano, *Medieval Travel and Travelers: A Reader*, 2.
88 This mistaken notion was further precipitated by rumors that the Mongols were linked to Prester John, a fictitious Christian religious leader who purportedly led a sect that inhabited the Far East. Many believed Mongols therefore adhered to Christianity, albeit a heretical sect. See Allen and Emilie Amt, *The Crusades: A reader*, 396.
89 Allen and Emilie Amt, *The Crusades: A reader*, 398.

of truth" and convert the Mongols toward Christianity.[90] The Pope's letters have a distinctly paternalistic tone, as he orders the Khan to do various things as if he were in a subordinate position and not an equally influential world figure. It diminishes the Khan's authority and perceived intelligence, diminishing him to the status of the beasts he purportedly takes as companions (i.e., Falcons). The Khan catches on to this treatment and retorts in a 1246 letter to the Pope that "from the rising of the sun to its setting, all the lands have been made subject to me," and as such, he must be favored by God.[91] He then ends the letter by directly associating himself with God, ordering the Pope that "if you ignore my command, I shall know you as my enemy."[92] The message was clear: the Mongols would not bend the knee to Christendom and would remain a force to be reckoned with for the foreseeable future.[93]

Mongols nevertheless captured the Medieval European imagination, with fear giving way to curiosity. It is the sense of mystery they invoked that informed efforts to craft understandings of the Mongols, categorize them, and place them forever within the confines of foreignness. Missionary ventures and travelogues emerging from the late thirteenth to early fourteenth century accomplished this by establishing various continuities in what characterizes a resident of the Far East. These include an emphasis on their violent nature, inducing monstrous qualities, continuous associations between them and the natural world, their abundance of wealth, and the incredible power that the Khan holds over his people. All serve to create a universalized visage of those people of the 'Far East' bereft of nuance and internal differentiation, providing a framework for stereotypes that enforce colonial and orientalist processes in the early modern period.[94]

Early thirteenth-century European accounts of the Mongols withheld any pleasantries, written in the context of total warfare with these people encroaching on their land. In the 1238 *Chronicle of Novigrad,* the Mongols were

---

90 Allen and Emilie Amt, *The Crusades: A reader*, 397.

91 Allen and Emilie Amt, *The Crusades: A reader*, 399.

92 And by proxy, his command becomes God's command via his association. This is a very clever way to force the Pope into a submissive state, as he is charged with being a servant to God's will. And if the Khan truly has God on his side, then it is he who the Pope must submit to. Allen and Emilie Amt, *The Crusades: A reader,* 399.

93 This anecdote also disputes Said's notion of Orientalism as a "submissive, feminine East to the masterful, masculine West," giving credit to Shayne Legassie's claim that Medieval European relations with the 'foreign' were distinctly 'Pre-Oriental' processes wherein 'foreign' groups maintained a sense of agency against Europe and had not yet been colonized. See Phillips, *Before Orientalism,* 15.

94 That is, an understanding of how people can differ greatly within an ethnic, racial, or religious grouping and do not all adhere to the same set characteristics. This is a concept Medieval Travelogues resist in favor of creating a generalized understanding of a people at the risk of being disingenuous to those people.

framed as agents of divine wrath, claiming that "God has brought wild beasts out of the desert to eat the flesh of the strong."[95] Not only does this frame the Mongols as more animalistic than human, but it also discards their ability to enact warfare for pragmatic motives like resource acquisition, instead asserting they are enslaved to the Latin Christian God's bidding. Like the Saracens, the Mongols were also accused of committing the monstrous act of anthropophagy. In letters written between 1241 and 1244, Archbishop Peter of Russia described their propensity for eating "horses, dogs, and other abominable meats," including cooked "human flesh."[96] Mongols are imbued with the qualities of the monstrous by Europeans, which may be a reflexive response to the destabilization that Mongol raids induced upon their lands. These descriptions coincided with the Church's attempts to enact an alliance with the Mongols through missionary ventures, hoping to use them to defeat the Saracens.[97] As a result, perceptions of Mongols often oscillated between admiration and disgust.[98]

It is within this context that Marco Polo's travels began, granted the unique opportunity to conduct an extensive study of the Far East via his vassalage to Kublai Khan beginning in 1275.[99] Having lived in the Far East for nearly two decades, his account of these lands and their people in his written report *Divisament dou monde* became gospel for those wishing to ascertain the 'exotic.'[100] Many of Polo's descriptions emphasize the opulence of the Mongols, such as when he described the White Feast they hold every New Year's Day to bring good fortune upon the year by adorning themselves in white clothing. Not only is the Great Khan given "gold, silver, and precious stones," but it is

95 Phillips, *Before Orientalism,* 91.

96 Phillips, *Before Orientalism,* 91.

97 See the earlier anecdote regarding Pope Innocent IV's letters to the Khan.

98 One of the more notable missionary ventures was conducted by Franciscan missionary William of Rubrick, who traveled to Mongolia between 1253 and 1255 hoping to convert Mongols toward Christianity while also finding a group of German miners captured by the 'tartars.' He encountered difficulties in his attempts at converting the Mongols, but was able to meet "the Great Khan, Möngke Khan, at Karakorum." He recorded his encounters in an *Itinerarium,* one of the earliest vivid descriptions of Mongol culture. For many missionaries like Rubruck, these journeys manifested as spiritual trials. Quoting the Apocryphas, Rubruck stated "he will travel through strange countries; for he hath tried the good and the evil among men." For him, it may be that the Mongols and their 'foreign' way of life served as a temptation from a more righteous path based in Western norms. The 'foreign' becomes a temptation in and of itself. See Adam Matthew, "William of Rubruck," (Medieval Travel Writing, 2022). Also see Norbert Ohler, *The Medieval Traveller* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2010), 56.

99 This included exploration of Persia, China, Tibet, Burma, and possibly the southern parts of India. No other Westerner at the time had the ability to gather such extensive knowledge of these Far Eastern lands, making him a premier authority on what the lands and people inhabiting them were like. Polo, *The Travels,* i.

100 Polo, *The Travels,* x.

customary for eighty-one times every type of gift to be given from each province to him, communicating to Polo's audience the vast wealth and power harbored by the Mongols.[101] While explaining their capacity for challenging European powers in the thirteenth century, it also alienated the Mongols from normalcy via their incredible opulence, furthering their characterization as 'foreign.'

When describing Kublai Khan himself, Polo also spent a noticeably long time discussing his associations with beasts. For example, in chapter eighteen, he describes the quantity of game sent to the Khan's court during the winter months. Then, in chapter nineteen, he asserts the Khan uses large animals like lions "to catch boars, wild oxen, and asses," while eagles "are trained to catch wolves."[102] Despite already capturing the essence of these activities, he then dedicates another four pages to the Great Khan's hunting strategies in chapter twenty-one.[103] The excess of description for the Mongols' associations with animals perpetuates the idea that their connection to the natural world is a very important aspect of their identity. While not necessarily claiming that being closer to nature makes them subhuman, it does create a framework for those claims to be made later based on Polo's observation that they can even have large animals like lions do their bidding. To a European, these abilities, coupled with their incredible wealth, are not normal and reify the Mongols into the realm of the abnormal, the 'exotic.'[104]

While not nearly as extensive as Polo's descriptions, Mandeville also wrote about the Far East in the latter half of his late fourteenth-century *Travels*. This section begins with his journey through India, where he encounters such wonders as the "Well of Youth" that imparted youth and a life without sickness upon those who drank from it.[105] He also claims the local people worship an ox whose "dung and urine" the king rubs on himself to be made holy." These same

101 For instance, the Great Khan will receive eighty-one horses from each province as a part of this nine times nine system. Up to five thousand elephants are also paraded around in fanciful clothing worked with Gold and Silver. Polo, *The Travels,* 144.

102 Polo, *The Travels,* 147.

103 Polo, *The Travels,* 148-151.

104 Despite the reputational harm some of Polo's claims would incur, it is apparent that he had a strong sense of admiration for the Mongols as well. This is clear in his description of their station system, wherein stations can be found every 25 to 30 miles in Mongolia for travellers to restock and find good horses. He exalted "so wonderful a system, and so effective in its operation, as it is scarcely possible to describe." These descriptions, clearly indicating how highly advanced Mongol civilization was, make it all the more curious that early modern European travellers would instead stick to viewing these people as lesser than by virtue of the 'exotic' qualities established in works like Polo's *Travels.* Polo, *The Travels,* 156.

105 Would be interesting to assess if this was the origin for later rumors of a 'fountain of youth' in the New World. Mandeville, *The Travels,* 163.

people then proceed to "slay their children to pour their blood upon the idols and make sacrifices."[106] These descriptions of India are clearly in the realm of the fantastical and absurd, painting a visage of a people who are a direct affront to Christendom via their worship of false idols and willingness to commit horrors upon themselves and slay their children. Even still, these lands harbor miracles like the 'Well of Youth,' so India cannot be entirely perceived as hellish. Instead, it can certainly be viewed as eternally outside the norms of Christian society, making travel through these lands an extensive labor for the likes of Mandeville.[107]

It is in his account of the Mongols that Mandeville provides some of the best evidence for the explicit categorization of foreign people in travelogues. That is via his sweeping generalizations, as he claims, "all they wish for is to put all lands under their subjugation."[108] Not only does this place the Mongols in an antagonistic position for Europeans who wish to maintain their lands, but it also assumes all Mongols share the same motive via the use of 'they' and 'their.' He cannot recognize variability amongst the Mongols, instead assuming inescapable homogeneity within distinct groups. That claim is further proven when he states "all the tartars have small eyes and little beards" with "no thick hair and are bald."[109] Here, he creates a universal phenotype for the Mongol, a definitive category of a person whose simplification allows for easier consumption and commodification for a European audience. Now it is the case that if a Mongol does not fit these characteristics, they cannot be a true Mongol or vice versa, to Europeans. These notions forever stain relations between different cultural groups, wherein similarities cannot be assessed, for these 'foreign' groups must conform to only being understood via their differences. That is Mandeville's contribution to European relations with the Far East.

Upon Kublai Khan's death in 1294, he was revered as "the Son of Heaven, inheritor of the Dragon Throne" by his people at a time when the Mongols were seemingly an unstoppable force in the Far East. Alas, "just as in only three generations a nomad tribe had exploded into an empire of incredible extent, so in only three more it would disintegrate and be absorbed."[110] While the Mongols had tolerated "the occasional Western visitor" since the rule of Genghis Khan, the encroaching Ming dynasty "showed no such tolerance or curiosity." Upon forcing the Mongols out of China in 1368, they shut down

---

106 Mandeville, *The Travels,* 163.

107 As Shayne Legassie argues in *The Medieval Invention of Travel,* the traveller is conducting an extensive labor that imparts ethos upon their written accounts for the horrors and abnormal things/people they had to witness. It is not evidence but the claim of travel itself and its implied labor that proves their anecdotes.

108 Mandeville, *The Travels,* 230.

109 Mandeville, *The Travels,* 230.

110 Polo, *The Travels,* xx.

many roads across Asia, which later became impassable thanks to waves of marauding Turks.[111] For two and a half centuries, China would remain closed off to the West. As a result, knowledge of the East was largely concentrated in the travelogues published in the brief period of cultural exchange between the West and Mongol society. Any popular misconceptions, fictions, or idiosyncrasies regarding the Far East would largely remain uncorrected in the Western imagination, shaping a perception of a 'foreign' land dripping in opulence and heresies. Just before the early modern period could commence, the Far East had also morphed into the 'exotic.'

That is not to say the East itself did not take part in these instances of cultural exchange, wherein they also created travelogues that shaped their own conceptions of Western polities. A notable example comes from Rabban Sauma (c. 1220 – 1294), author of the aptly titled *Travelogue,* who served as a monk and priest in the Church of the East, a branch of Christianity located in central Asia. It was then from Baghdad that the Mongols employed him to travel to Western Europe and convince Europeans to join them in a joint expedition against Muslim society.[112] Sauma's background demonstrates how Medieval society did not exist in a strict binary between East and West, but rather that there was significant cooperation between these spheres, dependent on the context. Unlike Mandeville or Polo, Sauma paid no regard to 'cultural curiosities,' instead expressing relief at the sight of "the churches and the shrines of the fathers," with his Christian background influencing his admiration for Western locales, even despite originating from the 'paganized' East.[113] He does claim to have seen a great serpent emerge from a volcano on the "Sea of Italy," proving the injection of fantastical elements remains pervasive even when the journey is from the East into the West.[114] Sauma's *Travelogue* thus introduces a necessary qualifier to my argument, as he proves the dichotomy between East and West as separate spheres is largely artificial, as the world was far more interconnected than the travelogues of Polo or Mandeville may indicate. Yet it is that popular assumption of the East and West as separate spheres that European travelogues implicitly pushed for, allowing the existence of those like Sauma to be relegated to the periphery of history.

Conclusion: In 1492, Columbus Sailed the Ocean Blue…

In 1492, a few vessels crept across the vast Atlantic towards a destiny unbeknownst to their intrepid passengers. The leader of this expedition, Christopher Columbus, sat in his cabin as a nighttime fog eclipsed his vessel. On the verge of sleep, he reviewed the seventy marginal notes made in his most prized

111 Polo, *The Travels,* x.
112 Romano, *Medieval Travel and Travelers: A Reader*, 210.
113 Romano, *Medieval Travel and Travelers: A Reader*, 212.
114 Romano, *Medieval Travel and Travelers: A Reader*, 213.

possession: a Latin edition of Marco Polo's *Divisament dou Monde.* Therein, he reviewed Polo's "reports on the wealth of Cathay" and his "estimates of distances," certain that he sailed toward a new westward trade route into the 'Indies' ripe for exploitation.[115] The candle next to him flickered, and sleep suddenly overtook him. In his dreams, he saw himself as Polo, bravely marching across vast lands and getting a firsthand taste of the strange, the 'exotic.' That was the desire encased in his heart as he rested. A desire which manifested in his discovery of an entirely New World, vast and bountiful. It was on those sandy shores that he encountered 'Indians.' Were they the very same Indians who worshipped idols and committed blood sacrifices of their very own children? Nevertheless, he entered upon a land he could only conceive as strange and 'foreign,' instilled with models for categorizing the land's inhabitants as such. With those like Mandeville and Marco Polo as his guides, Christopher Columbus would herald an Age of Discovery wherein the categorization of the 'foreign' would become a model for their exploitation and control under the boot of European colonial power.

As the Christopher Columbus anecdote illustrates, history cannot be understood as a series of isolated eras but instead as a continuous flow, wherein the ideas disseminated in previous eras come to influence the actions of the next. Such is the case with how Late Medieval travelogues crafted caricatures for 'foreign' groups that disseminated and naturalized themselves amongst Europeans, influencing interactions with what was deemed the 'foreign'. The result of this 'exoticization' process is best ascertained through a visual aid provided by artist Erhard Reuwich, who created woodcuts of 'Exotic' people for a late fifteenth-century travelogue. He was joined by a traveling priest named Mainz, who wrote the book, which was intended not only to provide a pilgrimage account to the 'Holy Land' but also to serve as a guide to the people and locals of the Near East. Amidst their travels, Reuwich illustrated any local inhabitants they encountered, accompanied by group descriptions that were often framed "in highly negative terms."[116] Each of these portraits is meant to encapsulate entire groups, with the top left being depictions of Saracens/Muslims, the top right being Ethiopians, the bottom left being Syrians, and the bottom right being Turks.[117] These caricatures come with the implication that these vast swaths of people, including religious denominations like Jews and Muslims, can be generalized into singular depictions, easily recognizable to the

115 Polo, *The Travels,* xi.

116 Romano, *Medieval Travel and Travelers: A Reader*, 12-16.

117 Romano, *Medieval Travel and Travelers: A Reader*, 17 – 19. There was also a caricature made for Jews, demonstrating how like the Saracens, they are largely understood from a race/ethnicity framework by Medieval Europeans rather than as a religious denomination consisting of people from diverse backgrounds.

European traveller or pilgrim. The nuance and differentiation amongst the Saracens, Syrians, Turks, and Ethiopians are stripped away in favor of placing them in a conceptual box from which they cannot escape. That is the essence of the 'Exoticization' process, wherein groups of people are understood via stereotypes and generalizations, visualized for early modern European consumption.

With the Age of Exploration underway after Columbus's voyage, Europe rose as a hegemonic power. To maintain that power on a newly global level, a binary was constructed "between Occident and Orient" that became a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony."[118] The conception of the 'foreign' Orient, starting in these travelogues, was necessary for European hegemony, which "depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."[119] Foreign cultures, in this context, were given little agency to define themselves, jeopardizing their ability to define the terms of their relationships with European powers in the following centuries. If those late medieval travelogues, instead of reifying differences under the confines of strangeness and the 'foreign,' had recognized these as alternative ways of life to learn from, they could have benefited from immense cross-cultural knowledge acquisition and personal growth. The result would be a less ignorant world, unrestricted by artifices and borders, and rich in cultural exchange that would stimulate greater global advancement. While that is not to say Marco Polo and Mandeville should be held liable for the genocide and exploitation of Native Americans and other peoples by European colonizers, it does present a broader message regarding history itself. That is, how something as minimal as the language used to describe foreign groups in travel narratives can have a trickle-down effect on how those groups are perceived, thereby using those perceptions of their purported inhumanity and exotic qualities to justify colonial exploitation. It calls for a *longue durée* perception of actions that takes into account broader consequences, and how those actions can shun the historical voices of others. Now the quest of modern historians is to peel back the veneer and reveal those historically marginalized groups, shunned by history. Thereby, a more honest perception of history can be formulated, one that recognizes the common humanity that everyone inhabits.

Dillon Page is a Senior at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill with a double major in History and Anthropology and a minor in Health and Society. He is currently finalizing his thesis on the evolution of Western perceptions of

118 Said, *Orientalism,* 5.
119 Said, *Orientalism,* 7.

Ancient Mesopotamia and how those perceptions shape their actions toward the people currently inhabiting the region. He also serves as a researcher for Jury-X, was a former Historian of the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies, and is a prospective volunteer for the Peace Corps in Mongolia, where he will continue pursuing his interest in the history of cultural perceptions.

Tri-Racial Politics and Native Resistance: The Lumbee Victory over the Ku Klux Klan at the Battle of Hayes Pond

Anna Routh
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

Abstract: This paper examines the 1958 Battle of Hayes Pond in Robeson County, North Carolina, in which members of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina routed a rally held by the Ku Klux Klan. Situating the event within the broader racial history of Robeson County, this paper argues that the Lumbee victory represented the culmination of nearly a century of shifting relationships among the county's tri-racial population of Native American, Black, and white residents. Drawing on a wide array of newspaper coverage, as well as the scholarship of historians such as Malinda Maynor Lowery and Timothy B. Tyson, this paper traces how the activities of the three distinct iterations of the Klan shaped public perception and racial politics in the region from Reconstruction through the Jim Crow era, setting the stage for the Battle of Hayes Pond. The county's system of "triple segregation" compelled the Lumbee to assert a distinct racial identity, leading to a divide between the Lumbee and Black communities. By examining both the Battle of Hayes Pond and the extensive press coverage that followed, this paper demonstrates how the Lumbee defeat of the KKK became a nationally celebrated moment of resistance that revealed the complex and evolving dynamics of race, identity, and power in the American South.

Introduction

On January 18, 1958, the Ku Klux Klan—perhaps the most fear-inspiring hate group in American history—found itself decisively outmatched by an unlikely and largely unheard-of foe: the Lumbee Indians of Robeson County. The Lumbee community drew the Klan's ire after hearing multiple reports of racial mixing between Lumbee people and white people. Unbeknownst to KKK leader James Cole, this racial mixing had been happening for as long as there had been white settlers in the New World.[1] *The Arizona Post* was one of many newspapers that covered the Battle of Hayes Pond, as the conflict was later called, which put the Lumbee in the national spotlight.

> Hail the savages! The minority groups of the United States owe a debt of gratitude to the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina. We're not in favor of militant uprisings, but we can't help but let out a war whoop

1 Bryce Nelson, "Lumbees and the Roanoke Riddle," The Carolina Indian Voice (Pembroke, NC), May 26, 1977

> for the Lumbees. Tired of being pushed around by Ku Klux Klan hoods, the Lumbee staged an early western days war party and broke a rally of the hate-peddling KKK. The uprising of the Lumbee must go down as a bold stroke in the continuing fight to keep true democracy in this country. Hail the Lumbee![2]

Racial dynamics in Robeson County were complex and evolved over the decades between Reconstruction and the Battle of Hayes Pond, shaped by the Jim Crow politics of the South. By 1958, Robeson County's tri-racial population of Lumbee, white, and Black people numbered 30,000, 40,000, and 25,000, respectively. Jim Crow segregation dictated that each of these groups use separate public facilities.[3] Malinda Maynor Lowery's book *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South* describes how the Lumbee people participated in structures of white supremacy in order to maintain their own identity and rights as a Native people who were not to be grouped with Black people, lest they lose their distinct identity. Although the Native American, Black, and poor white communities had once acted in solidarity against the Confederacy and rich white slaveholders during the Reconstruction era, Jim Crow broke them apart; the Lumbee were able to advantage themselves by identifying closer with whiteness than Blackness. By focusing on the activity of the three iterations of the Ku Klux Klan, this paper will argue that the Battle of Hayes Pond represents the culmination of nearly a century of complex, ever-changing dynamics between Robeson County's three racial groups.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of the Ku Klux Klan and the impact of its three distinct iterations on the Lumbee, essential to understanding how they came to find their place in the racial hierarchy and, eventually, to emerge as victors over the KKK. The second part argues that the differences in the activities of the first and second iterations of the Ku Klux Klan in Robeson County led to drastic shifts in how the Klan was depicted in newspaper coverage, setting the stage for the positive reception of the Battle of Hayes Pond. The third part analyzes the events surrounding the Battle of Hayes Pond and the nationwide press coverage celebrating the Lumbee's successful resistance, using local Black newspaper accounts published after January 18, 1968, to underscore the event's significance within the Civil Rights Movement. The 1958 Battle of Hayes Pond, as well as the extensive press coverage it received, were emblematic of the complex and evolving racial dynamics among the tri-racial population of Robeson County dynamics that had been developing since the Reconstruction era.

This paper contributes to the existing literature on the Battle of Hayes

---

2 Abe Chanin, "Hail the Savages," *The Arizona Post* (Tucson, AZ), January 24, 1958, Page 4

3 "KKK Seen As Carrying On Rally Tonight," Durham Sun, January 18, 1958

Pond, Lumbee history, and the KKK by highlighting perspectives from all three racial groups present in large numbers in Robeson County. Lumbee historian and author Malinda Maynor Lowery's *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South* provided the scholarly basis for the Lumbee perspective on the Battle of Hayes Pond and the preceding decades. While scholarship focused on the Black perspective on the Lumbee's method of resisting the KKK has largely been overlooked in literature, Timothy Tyson's book *Radio Free Dixie* helped to bridge this gap by including an outlook on the event that is distinct from Lumbee and white perspectives.

Newspapers provide the basis for primary source analysis, and they represent the different perspectives relevant to understanding the Battle of Hayes Pond alongside the aforementioned historical scholarship. The newspapers *The Lumbee* and *The Carolina Indian Voice* provided coverage from within the Lumbee community in Robeson County, and the Durham-based Black newspaper *The Carolina Times* featured several stories from different Black writers about the Battle of Hayes Pond and what it meant to the Black community. *The Robesonian* newspaper was foundational in providing the white Robeson County citizens' perspective on local affairs, especially regarding an incident that occurred in 1923, when the flogging of two white women by Klansmen disillusioned many of the white residents from the romanticized, pure impression of the KKK. The quantity and breadth of newspaper articles consulted in this paper provide a comprehensive history of racial dynamics in Robeson County and enable a unique triangulation of three perspectives central to understanding the impact and meaning of the Battle of Hayes Pond.

Origins of the Lumbee and the Ku Klux Klan

The origins of the modern-day Lumbee tribe are ambiguous and difficult to trace to a single ancestral Native American group. Their ancestry consists of survivors from several tribal nations who lived hundreds of years ago. Membership in Indigenous communities was characterized by kinship ties rather than ancestry, in contrast with how Europeans conceptualized familial belonging.[4] Two historians at UNC Pembroke in 1977 propounded the theory that the Lumbee Indians are the descendants of the Croatoan people and members of the mysterious and legendary Lost Colony of Roanoke Island. The theory is based on historical and phenotypical evidence, such as Native Americans with grey or blue eyes.[5] The Lumbee even identified with the name Croatoan for several decades until it was shortened to "Cro" and used as a slur against them in derogatory association with Jim Crow.[6] Malinda Maynor Lowery explains

4 Lumbee Tribe, "History and Culture," https://www.lumbeetribe.com/history-and-culture

5 Nelson, "Lumbees and the Roanoke Riddle"

6 Malinda Maynor Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: race, iden-*

her people's background as "the offspring of nearly 300 years of migration and cultural exchange between the varied Indigenous communities that inhabited Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina."[7] Constant migration due to warfare and disease contributed to the development of diverse Indian communities; Lowery described the Robeson County Indians as a "nation of nations," whose formal name, the Lumbee Tribe, was necessitated by colonial, state, and federal authorities.[8] She explains that indigenous people, prior to European contact, did not conceptualize their sense of belonging in terms of "tribes." The concept of a tribe was promoted by the state and federal governments. They were also not allegiant to government systems that exercised control over a bounded territory.[9] It was not until the late nineteenth century that Indian identity became linked to race and racial ancestry as a result of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which used white supremacist ideals to justify the United States' western expansion.[10] The combination of the Lumbee's diverse ancestry with the lack of genealogical records makes it difficult to pin down a single ancestral group and origin for the present-day Lumbee people. Their ties to Croatoan people and the Lost Colony make their heritage diverse and steeped in legend.

The KKK was formed in response to minoritized groups—chiefly Black Americans—gaining power. Historical scholarship on the KKK generally agrees that the Klan did not exist as one consistent organization from Reconstruction to the present, but rather as three distinct iterations under the same name. Established in 1865 by Confederate veterans, the original goal of the Klan was to oppose Reconstruction-era governments and intimidate Black politicians out of their positions of authority in order to restore white supremacy.[11] Despite holding immense social, economic, and political advantages over Black southerners, "white southerners shared a widespread fear that their former slaves would rapidly overtake them."[12] They worried about maintaining their power if freedpeople took advantage of their new liberties. This fear led to violence carried out by white individuals who were confident that they would not face any repercussions. This violence was a continuation of the violence carried out against slaves, effective in asserting local white control and intimidating Black southerners, but ineffective as a coordinated political force.[13] The Ku Klux Klan emerged as a solution to the uncoordinated southern white resistance move-

---

tity, and the making of a nation, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 51

7 Lowery*, Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 4

8 Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 21

9 Lowery*, Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 4

10 Lowery*, Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 4

11 "Ku Klux Klan – Extremism in America," Anti-Defamation League February 12, 2011

12 Parsons, *Ku-Klux, 11*

13 Parsons, *Ku-Klux, 14*

ment, and its structure as an organization of many small, local groups allowed it to maintain secrecy. From 1866 through 1871, the KKK killed and sexually molested hundreds of Black southerners, drove thousands of Black families from their homes and employment, and appropriated land, crops, guns, livestock, and food from Black southerners on a massive scale.[14] The KKK targeted Black people who sought political rights and social advancement, and the widespread terror generated by their attacks severely constrained Black southerners in their capacity to defend their own interests and carry out everyday activities.

The second iteration of the KKK, featuring the emblematic cross burnings and white-hooded robes, emerged in response to the expansion of Jim Crow Laws. Also significant was the release of the film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, which featured racist depictions of African Americans and portrayed the KKK as a heroic force that protects white women and maintains white supremacy.[15] The third Ku Klux Klan, which still exists today, was formed in opposition to the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation in the late 1940s; however, due to internal fighting and government infiltrations, Klan chapters are much smaller and less organized than they once were.[16] Due to the Klan's "insistence on remaining an 'invisible empire,' it is nearly impossible to estimate how many active members there are today," according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.[17]

Throughout the three historic phases of the Klan, historian Elaine Frantz Parsons observes two aspects of the groups presence in society: the embodied Klan, which consisted of men who carried out the violence against those who interfered with their interests, and the disembodied, abstract idea of the Klan in public discourse, produced by those who spoke or wrote about the collective white-on-black violence. The two Klans were entangled, as the Klan's image and the terror that it inspired were tied to accounts of the Klan's activities and their image in the media. It is no surprise, given the KKK's historical pursuit of white hegemony, that the Ku Klux Klan violently intervened in Robeson County. A 1966 edition of *The Lumbee* newspaper described the period from 1864 to 1874 as "The Reign of Terror" because law and order in Robeson County completely broke down, which was attributed to the Ku Klux Klan riding "hell-bent-for-leather through the countryside, leaving terror and disorder in their wake."[18] The idea of the embodied and disembodied Klan played out throughout the newspaper coverage—recording the Klan activity and reactions—in Robeson County over the course of nearly a century, from the Lowry

14 Parsons, *Ku-Klux, 17*
15 Southern Poverty Law Center, "Ku Klux Klan," *Extremist Files*
16 Southern Poverty Law Center, "Ku Klux Klan"
17 Southern Poverty Law Center, "Ku Klux Klan"
18 Lew Barton, "Lumbee-Klan Rivalry Dates Back," *The Lumbee* (Pembroke, N.C.), April 7, 1966

War to the Battle of Hayes Pond.

Triple Segregation

The system of triple segregation in Robeson County during Jim Crow forced the Lumbee to define themselves relative to the white and Black populations while maintaining their unique identity as Native people. Malinda Maynor Lowery's work explored how her people have understood their own identity and place in the racial hierarchy throughout their history. She emphasized how the dynamic racial politics within the tri-racial population of Robeson County led the Lumbee as a collective people to distance themselves from Blackness and resist the identity of "nonwhites." While the 1835 state constitution declared that "free Negroes, free mulattos, and free persons of mixed blood descended from negro ancestors to the fourth generation" could not vote, this language did not explicitly disenfranchise Native Americans. The Lumbee thus began distancing themselves from their mixed-race ancestry and cutting off social and economic associations with Black people, "whose mutual association as 'free persons of color' they came to fear and denigrate."[19] While the Lowry War—named for the young Lumbee man who led a vigilante rebellion against the Confederate police and KKK—was characterized by the multiracial coalition of Lumbee and free Black people, there was increased pressure on the Lumbee to assert their own identity as one disassociated from Blackness built throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of the dominant impact of Jim Crow on race relations in Robeson County. By 1910, there were separate public facilities for the three racial groups in Robeson County: white, Black, and Native American. Segregated schools and churches, for instance, helped Native Americans foster an identity that was fundamentally different from a white or Black racial identity. Lowery described their embrace of segregation as a double-edged sword, as "excluding blacks and whites from their community assured Indians control over some of their own affairs, but it also conceded whites' power to govern race relations."[20] This system of segregation in Robeson County and the accompanying state of racial politics was in place long after *The Robesonian* covered the Brown v. Board Decision on May 17th, 1954; thirteen years passed before *The Lumbee* newspaper covered the proposed Robeson County desegregation plan in 1969.[21]

The Lowry War and Proctorville Attack: Klan Activity Prior to 1958

The Ku Klux Klan's presence in Robeson County during its first and second iterations help explain the public reactions conditions that made the Lumbee victory at the Battle of Hayes Pond in 1958 possible. The KKK

19 Lowery*, Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South, 15*

20 Lowery*, Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South, 21*

21 "Proposed Desegregation Plan for Robeson County Schools," *The Lumbee* (Pembroke, N.C.), February 20, 1969

formed following the Civil War and was active during the Reconstruction era in Robeson County. During the Civil War, young Native American and Black men were the Confederate Army's primary labor force that built Fort Fisher at Cape Fear in Wilmington, NC.[22] To avoid conscription, many of these young men left their homes and communities to hide from the Home Guard, the name for the Confederate police force. They began by hiding from the Confederacy rather than resisting it; however, the older and disabled people that the young men left behind struggled to get by without enough laborers to support their farms.[23] These young Native American and Black men made a series of bold raids on plantations to seize arms, ammunition, food, and blankets, which they shared with their families and communities, as well as free Black people and poor white people. In his book, *To Die Game: The Story of the Lowry Band, Indian Guerillas of Reconstruction,* historian William McKee Evans stated that "when further resistance based on purely defensive tactics had become virtually impossible by the winter of 1864-1865, the guerrillas switched from a policy of living upon the poverty of their Indian kin to one of living upon the affluence of the white slaveholders."[24] In March of 1865, the Home Guard suspected that the young Lumbee Lowry brothers were involved with the robberies, and searched the Lowry homestead. They found hidden weapons, ammunition, blankets, and clothing—and most incriminatingly—the golden head of a cane bearing that had previously belonged to a "prominent gentleman." The leaders of the Home Guard hastily convened a court and approved a motion to execute the two men who had been living at the Lowry homestead: Calvin's brother William Lowry and their father Allen Lowry. Motivated to get revenge on the people who killed his father and brother, Henry Berry Lowry began what became known as the Lowry War. He went down in Lumbee history as a legendary hero shrouded in mystery.[25]

20-year-old Henry Berry Lowry was joined on his quest for revenge by several of his Lumbee family members as well as his friends—which included white and Black men—and they quickly became known as "The Lowry Gang."[26] Over the next seven years, Lowry led his gang in enacting vigilante violence against the Home Guard and the Ku Klux Klan, raiding plantations and homes of white supremacists and redistributing their wealth. Lowry was responsible for killing an estimated fifteen men before he mysteriously disappeared after robbing the local sheriff's office of $28,000 (2025 equivalent of over

22 Lumbee Legend Lives On at UNCP," *The Robesonian*, November 4, 2015

23 William McKee Evans, *To Die Game: The Story of the Lowry Band, Indian Guerillas of Reconstruction*, (Louisiana State University Press, 2021), 7

24 Evans, *To Die Game*, 7.

25 Evans, *To Die Game,* 8.

26 Troy L. Kickler, "Henry Berry Lowry (1845–?)," North Carolina History Project, accessed April 29, 2025, https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/henry-berry-lowry-1845/.

$700,000).[27] Some believed that he died during or shortly after this heist, while others maintained that he was alive in the 1930s[28]. He went down in history as a divisive figure, known to some as a criminal but to the Lumbee as a hero.

While Lumbee and Black people had fought together in the Lowry War against Confederates and the first iteration of the KKK, white public opinion of the KKK in Robeson County supported the Klan during the Lowry War. White opinions turned against the Klan, however, after an attack led by a group of second-iteration Klansmen in 1923. According to *The Robesonian*—which was founded in 1870 by a former chaplain in the Confederate Army—white people favored the Klan during its first iteration because they viewed the Klan's actions as restoring order and protecting the virtues of white womanhood from Black men.[29] North Carolinian historian and author Timothy Tyson upheld this claim, referring to the county's "history of strong support for the Klan" in his book about Black resistance to the KKK.[30] However, *The Robesonian* maintained that public opinion changed after Robeson County was shaken by an incident of Klan violence enacted against two white women on the night of April 14th, 1923, in Proctorville, NC, a small town 20 miles outside of Pembroke. An edition of *The Lumbee* newspaper reflected on 1923 as a turning point, stating that "although public opinion here seemed to favor the Klan for a time, the tide was turned in the other direction by such acts of violence as the flogging of helpless women in 1923."[31] These newspapers referred to "public opinion" without specifying whether public opinion encapsulated opinions of members of every racial group in the county, or if they were referring solely to the foremost viewpoint held by prominent white people. As *The Robesonian* was founded by a Confederate and published an article supporting the first Klan, it is reasonable to assume that "public opinion," in this instance, was limited to white public opinion; the Lumbee operated separate newspapers and maintained their stance against the Klan following the Lowry War.

Details about the KKK's violence against white women in Robeson County elicited strong reactions from the press regarding the Klan's role in creating lawlessness. The April 30 edition of *The Robesonian* provided the detailed testimony of one of the victims, 84-year-old Mrs. Hattie Purvis. She had been warned about the Klan coming to her house, and later that night, a group of men in masks and robes with red crosses on the front broke down her door. Mrs. Purvis went on to describe the violence that the men enacted against herself

---

27 Kickler, "Henry Berry Lowry (1845–?)"
28 Kickler, "Henry Berry Lowry (1845–?)"
29 Copeland Jacobs, "65 Years Ago: Lumbee Mark 1958 Battle of Hayes Pond," *The Robesonian,* January 20, 2023
30 Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power,* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 137
31 Barton, "Lumbee-Klan Rivalry Dates Back"

and Mrs. Watson; they were thrown into cars, choked, then driven to a Black church and bent over and beaten with a leather strap. Klan leaders told Mrs. Purvis that if any information about the attack was publicized, "they would get [her] head next time, that there were 10,000 of them."[32] The Klan had been after Mrs. Purvis because she had been accused of running an immoral house, which she denied. Mrs. Watson said the Klan had accused her of "raising a crook and rearing her children in the wrong way."[33] They showed the editor of *The Robesonian* the evidence of their "inconceivably brutal and severe treatment" beating.[34]

> Is Robeson County civilized? Not when hooded men drag defenseless women from their homes and beat them cruelly on their naked flesh; not when men try to take the law into their own hands. We must have the protection of the law. Law enforcement cannot be in the hands of private citizens.[35]

The victims' identity as white women was central to the white press's coverage of the Klan completely shifted. The commentary in the following May 3 issue of *The Robesonian* criticized the second iteration of the Klan for promoting lawlessness in Robeson County while praising the first Klan for its accomplishments.[36] According to a press comment from the *Wilmington Dispatch,* the first Klan was organized to "protect womanhood and defeat the machinations of corrupt rulers," and "there is no more similarity between the organization that existed in the Reconstruction days and the present counterfeit, than there is between killing in self-defense and unprovoked and premeditated murder."[37] He claimed the first KKK disbanded upon the return of organized and orderly government, while the second, present-day Klan, promoted disorder and lawlessness through their actions and disguise. There was no discussion of the racial violence and terror carried out by the Klan in *The Robesonian*, and the coverage centered around how white society in Robeson County was impacted. Ultimately, the Klan escaped legal punishment, as only three of the eighteen men involved with the attack on the two white women were charged with flogging, and even those men were acquitted by the Robeson County Superior Court. Regardless, "the tide of public opinion was turned at last against them."[38] This change in public perspective laid the groundwork for the positive reaction to the Lumbee routing the KKK several decades later, as white people were increasingly disillusioned with the Klan.

32 "Two Women Flogged At Proctorville by 18 Masked Men," *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, NC), April 30, 1923

33 "Two Women Flogged At Proctorville by 18 Masked Men"

34 "Two Women Flogged At Proctorville by 18 Masked Men"

35 "Two Women Flogged At Proctorville by 18 Masked Men"

36 "Press Comment on Whipping of Women"

37 "Press Comment on Whipping of Women"

38 Barton, "Lumbee-Klan Rivalry Dates Back"

The 1958 Battle of Hayes Pond

Newspaper coverage from immediately before the January 18 Battle of Hayes Pond elucidated the Klan's motivation behind targeting Robeson County, as well as how the Lumbee prepared to respond. James Cole, the leader of the KKK of the Carolinas, went to Robeson County in early January to rally his forces and announced that "there's about 30,000 half-breeds in Robeson County and we are going to have a cross burning and scare them up."[39] There were two cross burnings in opposition to the racial mixing happening in Robeson County on Monday, January 13. One cross burning was at the residence of a Lumbee woman who was dating a white man, and another was where a Lumbee family moved into a white neighborhood.[40] What Cole apparently did not know was that he was centuries late in preventing interracial relationships in Robeson County, according to the prevailing theory of the fate of the Lost Colony of Roanoke. There was varying local newspaper coverage about the degree to which this cross burning caused a stir in the community, with some accounts claiming that it "angered decent and law-abiding citizens throughout all of Robeson County,"[41] while others described conditions as calm, and that "nobody [was] stirred up."[42] Following the outcome of the Battle of Hayes Pond, *The Carolina Times* reported that "what stirred the Lumbee tribe, I'm told is that the Klansmen said that it was 'un-American' for Indians and white adults to date each other."[43]

Mayor Oxendine of Pembroke said that the Lumbee "ought to be able to keep things under control," as there were only about ten Klan members in the county and 30,000 Lumbee. Mayor Oxendine also stated that "there will be no trouble unless the other side starts it."[44] When James Cole was asked about whether he intended to use violence to stop race-mixing in Robeson County, he responded that the guns his Klansmen carry will "speak for themselves."[45] Simeon Oxendine, one of the young Lumbee men at the forefront of the rout, made a point to discredit Cole and his Klan's efforts in an interview after the Battle of Hayes Pond: "whites and Indians have been mingling, intermarrying and living near each other in Robeson County since the Civil War."[46]

---

39 Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 137

40 "KKK Seen As Carrying On Rally Tonight," *Durham Sun,* January 18, 1958

41 "KKK Seen As Carrying On Rally Tonight"

42 "Scheduled Klan Meeting Rocks Lumbee Tribe"

43 Robert Spivack, "The Return Of The Natives," *The Carolina Times* (Durham, NC), February 1, 1958

44 "No Trouble Unless Klansmen Start It, Indian Mayor Says," *Durham Morning Herald*, January 18, 1958

45 Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 137

46 Robert A. Willis, "Pembroke Mayor's Son, Proud Lumbee Holds Klan Flag as Trophy," *Greensboro Daily News*, January 20, 1958

James Cole's announcement that there would be a KKK rally in Maxton, a small town in Robeson County, on January 18 generated rumors in the days leading up to the planned rally. This generated uncertainty around whether the rally would still be on, due to talk of potential violence if the KKK tried to intimidate the large Lumbee population of Robeson County. One of these rumors was that there were above-average sales of arms and ammunition, and that "75 percent of the Indians attending…would go armed."[47] The Robeson County sheriff attempted to dissuade Cole from holding the rally by informing him that Indians had threatened to kill him if he spoke at the rally.[48] Cole wanted federal troops to defend the Klan against potential violence at their rally in Maxton, arguing that they should receive the same protection that the Black students received at Little Rock. Cole failed to consider that the protection at Little Rock was for nine nonviolent teenagers entering their high school, compared to Cole's request for federal troops to back a violent, armed hate group.[49] Nevertheless, the Klan ultimately did not officially ask for this special protection, as Cole had said he did not think there would be any trouble.[50]

On the night of January 18, 1958, around fifty well-armed members of the KKK drove to the center of an open field in Maxton and set up a small generator with a PA system and a lightbulb in preparation for their rally. These fifty Klansmen were quickly outnumbered, as at least 500 Lumbee people—as many as 1,000 by some estimates—arrived at the rally, ready with their weapons.[51] Not long into Cole's speech at the start of the rally, a Lumbee farmer shot the lightbulb, plunging the field into darkness and chaos. As another Lumbee man wrestled a Klansman's gun away from him, similar brawls broke out between the Klansmen and the Lumbee people; the only light came in flashes from photographers' cameras and sparks from rifles and handguns as shots rang out.[52] One of the first Lumbee at the site, Ned Sampson, recalled seeing people lying on the ground. "I didn't know if they were dead or not. When the flashes were going, I was thinking there were forty to fifty people dead out there."[53]

It did not take long for Cole to abandon the rally and run off towards the surrounding swamps, abandoning unlit crosses and panicked followers who frantically drove off in all directions. Those fleeing the rally included Cole's wife, who drove her own car into a ditch and was helped out by some Lumbee

47 "KKK Seen As Carrying On Rally Tonight"
48 Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South,* 251
49 "No Trouble Unless Klansmen Start It, Indian Mayor Says;" "KKK seen as Carrying on Rally Tonight"
50 "No Trouble Unless Klansmen Start It, Indian Mayor Says"
51 Lowery, Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South, 251; Copeland Jacobs, "65 Years Ago: Lumbee Mark 1958 Battle of Hayes Pond"
52 Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 252
53 Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 252

men.[54] There were no fatalities, and only four Klansmen suffered minor injuries.[55] The Lumbee considered the lack of bloodshed to be miraculous and were grateful for this outcome, having only intended to scare off the Klan. According to Lumbee leader Simeon Oxendine, "I told the boys to take it easy, slap 'em around a little, if you have to, I told them, but don't hurt 'em."[56] Pauline Locklear, one of the Lumbee women at the rally, said, "I am still puzzled that no one got killed."[57]

Reactions to the Battle

Across the nation, people spanning racial, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds felt triumphant following the outcome of the Battle of Hayes Pond. Newspaper writers and editors jumped on the opportunity to provide their own commentary on the event or to simply share in the laughter at the Klan's monumental humiliation. An exploration of the extensive news coverage of this event demonstrates the Lumbee's impact as an inspiration to resistance movements, while also prompting discussion about potential strategies for Black resistance. *The Arizona Post*, the first Anglo-Jewish publication in Tucson, Arizona, primarily covered happenings in the local Jewish community as well as topics related to Judaism and Zionism more broadly. While it was unusual for this paper to publish stories from outside of the Jewish community in Arizona, they expressed their immense gratitude for the Lumbee people standing up to the KKK, describing the Battle of Hayes Pond as "a bold stroke in the continuing fight to keep true democracy in this country.[58]"

The Petal Paper, based in Mississippi, was especially interested in the Lumbee and the Battle of Hayes Pond, publishing three separate issues featuring stories about the event and its implications for the advancement of civil rights. *The Petal Paper* began as a small-town paper focusing on local news and advertisements, then pivoted following Brown v. Board to criticize Mississippi's opposition to desegregation.[59] The front page of their February 13, 1958, issue featured an article originally from *The Atlanta Constitution,* which credited the Lumbee for chasing off the "Ku Klux pretenders to Americanism," and referred to the Lumbee people as the "100-per-cent Americans," a title that

54 Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie,* 138
55 Willis, "Pembroke Mayor's Son, Proud Lumbee Holds Klan Flag as Trophy"
56 Willis, "Pembroke Mayor's Son, Proud Lumbee Holds Klan Flag as Trophy"
57 Lowery*, Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 252

58 Chanin, "Hail the Savages"
59 About the Petal Paper (Petal, Miss.), 1953-19??, Library of Congress, accessed April 28, 2025, https://www.loc.gov/item/sn85044791/.

they described the KKK as having falsely claimed for themselves. The paper described the event as "altogether, one of the most hilarious and satisfying incidents of recent months."[60] *The Petal Paper* republished *The Denver Post's* article about the routing of the KKK, which echoed the same sentiment of awe and appreciation. "Not since the battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876 has there been such a spectacular Indian white affray as the routing of the Ku Klux Klan at Maxton." They declared that "henceforth, KKK won't strike terror in humble hearts. Rather, the display of the long feared symbol will arouse derision for any so foolish as to wear it."[61] The lighthearted and inspirational tone of the news media after the Battle of Hayes Pond underscored a broader national shift away from support for the Klan; the Lumbee victory was celebrated as a powerful symbol of courage and hope in the fight for civil rights.

Timothy Tyson provides a critical perspective on how coverage and reception of the event would have differed had Black people been the ones confronting the Klan. He argued that the white press "had a field day" with the Lumbee rout of the KKK, finding humor in the Klan's humiliation.[62] According to NC Civil Rights Leader Robert F. Williams, the white press "played up the Indian-Klan fight" because "the Indians are a tiny minority and people could afford to laugh at the incident as a sentimental joke—but no one wanted Negroes to get the impression that this was an accepted way to deal with the Klan."[63] At the time, the Lumbee numbered around 30,000 nationwide, and the vast majority lived in rural Robeson County, while the total population of Black people in the United States in 1960 was over 18 million.[64] Tyson added that the light-hearted, humorous coverage of the "Lumbee uprising" helped release tension in the South that "trembled uncomfortably close to the edge of a race war."[65] He averred that the national reaction to the Lumbee victory over the Klan revealed a great deal about the racial politics that gave rise to the Battle of Hayes Pond.

While newspapers across the country lauded the Lumbee for their bravery and reveled in the Klan's humiliation, Black writers reflected on what the Lumbee's approach to dealing with the KKK could mean for the Black resistance movement. *The Carolina Times* was an important voice for Black North Carolinians in the 1930s, as the Durham-based newspaper publicized racial inequities and the fight for racial equality in North Carolina and throughout the country. The January 25 edition featured an article by Alexander Barnes about

60 Ralph McGill, *The Petal Paper,* (Petal, MS), February 13, 1958

61 "Additional Views on the Uprising," *The Petal Paper* (Petal, MS), February 13, 1958

62 Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 138

63 Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 139

64 Center for Disease Control, "Population by age groups, race, and sex for 1960-97" https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/pop6097.pdf

65 Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 137

how the Black community had been informed of the Lumbee's plans, and had even been invited to take part.[66] Barnes described how "an Indian leader called upon a few of the outstanding Negroes on Friday night and told them that they were not looking for a fight with the Kluxers, but if they [the KKK] staged a demonstration in or near Maxton, they would really have a fight on their hands."[67] The Black community of Robeson County was in complete agreement with this idea and fully supported their Lumbee neighbors, according to Barnes. The Lumbee were afraid that the Klan might try to meet the night before the rally was planned, and after discussing this concern with Black leaders, a group of Lumbee and Black people arrived at the site with weapons on Friday night. This group went home and waited until Saturday night, after it became clear that the Klan would not be appearing. "It was established that practically every Negro in or near Maxton was at the scene Friday night," according to interviews with local citizens.[68] Barnes echoed a sentiment expressed by many writers who celebrated this event, that it had "just the right ring of poetic justice to it," and that "everybody likes to see a bully get his 'come uppence [sic].'"[69] Barnes suggested that the Lumbee's success with violently confronting the Klan in overwhelming numbers could point to a new potential course of action for the Black resistance movement to utilize against the Ku Klux Klan.[70]

Contrasting Barnes's suggestion and denoting the nuance within the Black reaction to The Battle of Hayes Pond, a later edition of *The Carolina Times* from February 1 featured the article "The Return of The Natives." Writer Robert Spivack opened with an assertion of non-violence as the superior form of resistance, stating that "the firm but non-violent methods of the Negroes at Little Rock and Montgomery are more effective. But it would be sheer hypocrisy to pretend that we were not amused at the plight in which the shirted-knights of the KKK found themselves after the Indian uprising at Maxton, NC not too long ago."[71] This argument poses an interesting contradiction to Barnes's article from six days prior, in which he had suggested that the Black community use tactics similar to those employed by the Lumbee at the Battle of Hayes Pond.[72] Over two decades later, writer Pat Bryant of *The Carolina Times* expressed his frustration with the state government's inaction in dealing with the Ku Klux Klan. Bryant supported the use of violence by Black Civil Rights leaders, believing it to be the only way to force the state government to act. Bryant references the Battle of Hayes Pond, stating that "the people are going to take to their guns

66 Alexander Barnes, "Maxton Negroes Backed Indian Attack on KKK," *The Carolina Times* (Durham, NC), January 25, 1958,
67 Barnes, "Maxton Negroes Backed Indian Attack on KKK"
68 Barnes, "Maxton Negroes Backed Indian Attack on KKK"
69 Barnes, "Maxton Negroes Backed Indian Attack on KKK"
70 Barnes, "Maxton Negroes Backed Indian Attack on KKK"
71 Spivack, "The Return of the Natives"
72 Barnes, "Maxton Negroes Backed Indian Attack on KKK"

like the Lumbee Indians," demonstrating the weight that the event still carried as a point of inspiration for activists.[73] Together, these three *Carolina Times* writers' perspectives reveal tensions in Black responses to the Battle of Hayes Pond, as they share admiration and respect for the Lumbee victory but disagree about what their success in violent confrontation could mean for the Black Civil Rights Movement.

Ms. Willa Robinson, a community activist in Robeson County who grew up in Maxton, told Malinda Maynor Lowery about her Black family's experience with the Klan. According to Robinson, Black people passed information about the KKK to the Lumbee Indians to help coordinate the resistance effort. Lowery asked Robinson about how the Black community felt after the Lumbee routed the Klan, to which she replied, "We loved it. We loved it."[74] Lowery speculated whether this support was evidence of a revival of the multiracial coalition led by Henry Berry Lowry during Reconstruction. But, she considered the experience of Ms. Willa Robinson and her family sitting on their porch at night with a gun to protect her Black grandfather from Klansmen as proof that Black people most certainly had their own motives to support resistance to the KKK.[75] It is unlikely that the Black community would have supported the Lumbee's plot without their own personal stake in the outcome, since the Lumbee had largely avoided helping them since Reconstruction.

Henry Golden, a writer for the *Carolina Israelite,* argued that the Lumbee routed the KKK for the wrong reasons, and that people ought not to celebrate Indian vigilantes taking the law into their own hands to maintain their own status as being disassociated from Blackness.[76] Golden's tone regarding this racial separation was much harsher compared to Lowery, who maintained in her book that the Lumbee did what was necessary to gain some rights and recognition under white supremacy and resist assimilation. While the Black and Lumbee people formed a common front against the Klan upon hearing about the planned rally, they did so because it served their independent interests, not out of mutual aid and allyship. The Lumbee's separation from the Black community ties back to the politics of triple segregation and needing to claim proximity to whiteness for social and political advantages. Regardless of the Lumbee's motives, the impact of the Battle of Hayes Pond as an inspiration to Civil Rights activists cannot be understated, as they proved that mounting a successful resistance to the "most widely proliferated and deadly domestic terrorist movement in the history of the United States" was possible, instilling hope in the fight for

73 Pat Bryant, "Should Racist Attacks Be Concern of the Government?" *The Carolina Times* (Durham, NC), October 31, 1981

74 Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 253

75 Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 253

76 Golden, "Indian Vigilantes Matter of Concern"

civil rights and democracy.[77]

Conclusion

As well as representing a complex history of racial dynamics in Robeson County, the Battle of Hayes Pond marked a turning point in Lumbee pride. Lumbee tribe member Jack Lowery talked about his experience as a participant in the battle when he was a high school senior. He said, "When I was young, you were not taught to be proud of being Lumbee," but their defeat of the Klan launched a new era for the Lumbee and catalyzed tribal pride.[78] The Lumbee Tribe is currently over 55,000 members strong, making it the largest tribe east of the Mississippi River and the ninth-largest tribe in the nation.[79] After a 137-year struggle, the Lumbee finally celebrated receiving full federal recognition from the U.S. government on December 18, 2025, which would create significant economic opportunities for the tribe, as well as federal health care, education, housing, child care, and disaster relief benefits.[80]

In contemporary society, Lumbee people continue to celebrate the Lowry War and commemorate the multiracial coalition in the fight for justice. *Strike at the Wind*! by Randolph Umberger debuted in 1976 and tells the epic story of the Lowry War through live musical performance. In lieu of a live performance in 2020, UNC Pembroke published a virtual show with a preface by Chancellor Robin Gary Cummings and Lumbee Chairman Harvey Godwin Jr. The Chairman emphasized how meaningful the story is to the Lumbee people, as well as the story's relevance today. "It's a play that represents the Lumbee people and the ability to move forward toward equality and justice," Godwin Jr. said. He also highlighted the diverse racial composition of Lowry's group and how they united to work towards a common goal and be on "the right side of history and the arc of justice."[81] Godwin Jr. spoke of a drastic shift in racial relations in Robeson County since the 1960s, and his words demonstrated that the Lumbee no longer need to play into white supremacy to succeed as a people; rather, they can return to a multiracial coalition with the Black and

---

77 Parsons, *Ku-Klux,* 16

78 Copeland Jacobs, "65 Years Ago: Lumbee Mark 1958 Battle of Hayes Pond"

79 "Federal Recognition of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina," The White House, accessed April 28, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/federal-recognition-of-the-lumbee-tribe-of-north-carolina/#:~:text=Today%2C%20according%20to%20the%20State,largest%20tribe%20in%20the%20Nation.

80 "Governor Stein Celebrates Decision That Extends Federal Recognition to Lumbee Tribe," Office of Governor Josh Stein, accessed January 21, 2026, https://governor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2025/12/18/governor-stein-celebrates-decision-extends-federal-recognition-lumbee-tribe

81 The Battle of Hayes Pond, uploaded by UNC Pembroke, Vimeo, accessed April 28, 2025, https://vimeo.com/441473438.

progressive white communities.

Despite the Lumbee drawing nationwide attention and praise in 1958 for routing the KKK, popular Internet sources for historical knowledge, such as *HISTORY* and *Encyclopædia Britannica,* omit the Lumbee's role in their historical timelines of Native America and the Ku Klux Klan.[82] Future research must address this gap by situating the Battle of Hayes Pond and the Lowry War within the Pan-Indian narrative of Native strength and resistance. The story of how the Lumbee maintained their unique identity among the Black and white populations in Robeson County throughout decades of oppression to find themselves in the national spotlight in 1958—victorious over the most infamous hate group in American history—represents the tenacious spirit that is shared across Native American history more broadly. Recognizing the Lumbee victory at the Battle of Hayes Pond within the broader American historical context not only fills a critical gap in mainstream narratives, but also reinforces its significance as a defining moment of Native American resilience and a turning point in the evolving dynamics of race and resistance in Robeson County.

Anna Routh is a graduating senior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, double majoring in history and public policy and minoring in education. Anna also led the APPLES Alternative Spring Break program as a break leader and co-chair, and serves as the events and partnerships manager for Student-Made UNC.

82 "Ku Klux Klan," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed April 28, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ku-Klux-Klan; "Native American Timeline," History.com, accessed April 28, 2025, https://www.history.com/articles/native-american-timeline. v

"A Waiting People Beyond Whom There are No Others": Representations of Religion in Jesuit Travel Writing from Early

Jack Snyder
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

Abstract: In the sixteenth century, missionaries from a new Catholic order, the Society of Jesus, started the first Christian mission in Japan. Jesuits traveled to Japan with the goal of converting the country to Catholicism, but this mission ended when the newly unified Japanese state persecuted and expelled the Order in the early seventeenth century. This paper studies the writings of these Jesuit missionaries in sixteenth and seventeenth century Japan. I analyze texts written by Francis Xavier (1506-1552), Luis Frois (1532-1597), and João Rodrigues (1561-1633) and argue that Jesuit authors created an optimistic picture of their cause that was particularly suited to their missionary readership. Jesuit writings, an essential set of sources for Japan's "Christian Century," are not just expository, but also argumentative. Xavier, the founder of the mission, portrayed Japan as well-suited for Christianity. Frois provided a one-sided, positive view of disputes between Christian and Buddhist clergy. Rodrigues continued to depict the Japanese mission as progressing towards success well after it was doomed to fail. Jesuit writers used their descriptions of Japan as a rhetorical device to ask for support from and encourage confidence in their readers.

Introduction

According to a 1585 text on the differences between Europe and Japan, "we [Europeans] profess only one God, one faith, one baptism and one Catholic Church; in Japan there are thirteen sects and almost all of them disagree on worship and veneration."[1] In 1585, however, around sixty years after the excommunication of Martin Luther, the existence of serious disagreement surrounding "worship and veneration" was more of a commonality between European and Japanese religion than a difference. This is just one example from a treatise of hundreds of comparisons, written by Luis Frois (1532-1597), a Portuguese Catholic priest and veteran of the Jesuit mission in Japan, in order to educate Jesuit missionaries on Japanese customs.[2] Frois surely understood that

1 Luis Frois, *The First European Description of Japan, 1585*, translated, edited, and annotated by Richard K. Danford, Robin D. Gill, and Daniel T. Reff (New York: Routledge, 2014), 102.

2 Daniel T. Reff, Introduction to *The First European Description of Japan, 1585*,

his description of European religion was not totally accurate, but in this work, he is not simply comparing religions or making a theological point about the importance of a unified church. Rather, by emphasizing the supposed strength of Catholicism and respective weakness of Japanese religion, his treatise sought to serve a purpose to the Japanese mission: increasing new arrivals' confidence and optimism about their project to convert Japan to Catholicism. There is an extensive corpus of Jesuit writings from sixteenth and seventeenth century Japan, which serves as a central set of sources for understanding the unique cultural and religious exchanges between early modern Japan and Europe. Many of these texts, however, can be viewed not just as documents of historical fact but also as rhetorical and argumentative works: in their descriptions and comparisons of religion, Jesuit authors endeavored to create optimism and stressed the belief that Catholic mission in Japan would ultimately triumph.

The Society of Jesus's mission in Japan was an important part of the first cultural, political, and economic exchange between Europe and Japan. The first European travel to Japan occurred in 1543, when a Chinese vessel, incidentally carrying three Portuguese merchants, was forced by a storm to land on a small, southern Japanese island.[3] Sixteenth century European visitors to Japan were usually other merchants or Christian missionaries, and the latter group was initially headed by an order in the Catholic Church called the Society of Jesus, or the "Jesuits." The fledgling Society, officially established in 1540, began its mission to convert Japan in 1549. As more Jesuits travelled to Japan to join the mission, more Japanese learned about their religion and culture; many converted, and many others were critical of the "new" teaching. For their part, the Jesuits produced an extensive corpus of writings about Japan: letters, reports, and instructional documents describing Japanese politics, customs, language, and religion.

Jesuit missionaries witnessed a dramatic shift in Japanese domestic politics which affected them profoundly. After an extended period of decentralization and local civil wars during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a successive series of three "Great Unifiers," powerful warlords, reunified the country in the late sixteenth century. The efforts of the unifiers culminated in Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), establishing a centralized military government ruled by his family. The Tokugawa government (*Tokugawa bakufu*) saw Christianity as a threat to stability and expelled all Europeans from Japan, excepting a small Dutch trading delegation, in a series of edicts enacted through the 1630s. These restrictions on European travel to Japan were enforced until 1853, when an American naval

---

by Luis Frois, translated, edited, and annotated by Richard K. Danford, Robin D. Gill, and Daniel T. Reff (New York: Routledge, 2014), 16.

3 Michael Cooper, "A Mission Interrupted: Japan," in *A Companion to the Reformation World*, edited by R. Po-chia Hsia, 393-407 (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 394.

expedition forced the country to reopen. The Tokugawa government persecuted Christianity and required Japanese Christians to give up the faith, ending what scholars, following C.R. Boxer, have called the "Christian Century" of exchange between Catholic Europe and Japan.[4]

The writings composed by Jesuits missionaries and other Europeans have long been understood as essential to understanding the relationship between early modern Japan and Europe. In 1951, Boxer remarked of the historiography of the "Christian Century" that "Basil Hall Chamberlain's observation that if we had to depend solely on Japanese sources we would know next to nothing of the Catholic episode in Japan's history, is still as true today as when it was written fifty years ago."[5] In a recent study, M. Antoni Ucerler explores the intellectual history of the mission in Japan: "not so much an account of Jesuit activities alone during this period, but […] what they *thought* they *should* (or *should not*) be doing."[6] Another contemporary scholar, Guillame Alonge, similarly analyzes what Jesuit sources show about "the Japanese reality itself, but also, if not above all, how it was caught by the eyes and ambitions of the missionaries."[7] This recent scholarship analyzes Jesuit writings not just as documentary evidence of the mission, but also as records of intellectual debate and change within early modern Christianity and demonstrates how these sources provide insight into the missionaries' practices and thought. But Jesuit texts from early modern do not just show the views of their authors: they are also influenced by the perspective of their readers.

Jesuit travel writing from early modern Japan often has particular persuasive aims based on its expected readership. Jesuit writings often create an optimistic picture of Japan and the Society's status there to boost morale, play to readers' expectations about the superiority of their own religion, and encourage financial support and extra manpower for the mission. Thus, even expository works from the Jesuit corpus from early modern Japan are also rhetorical works for their intended audiences. This paper will examine the rhetoric employed by three different authors from the Jesuit mission: Francis Xavier, the missionary saint who founded the mission in 1549, Luis Frois, a historian of the mission who worked in Japan until his death in the late sixteenth century, and João Rodrigues, a skilled linguist and interpreter who continued to write about Japan after the expulsion of his order in 1614. These three authors described the Japanese religious scene as well-suited to the Jesuit mission to support explicit and implicit arguments they made to the readers of their texts.

---

4 C.R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549-1650* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1951).

5 Boxer, *Christian Century*, viii.

6 Ucerler, *The Samurai and the Cross*, 7.

7 Guillame Alonge, *A History of Jesuit Missions in Japan: Evangelization, Miracles, and Martyrdom, 1549-1614*, (New York: Routledge, 2024), 1.

First Contact: Francis Xavier's Letter's on Japan

Francis Xavier (1506-1552), an early and prominent member of the Society of Jesus later canonized as a saint, founded the Catholic mission in Japan. Xavier was a close companion of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), a fellow Basque Spaniard who founded the Society in 1540. Xavier worked for years on the Society's behalf as a missionary in India and Southeast Asia. In 1547, he met a Japanese warrior named Yajirō and was impressed by his interest in Christianity.[8] Xavier decided to sail to Japan to try to convert its people to Catholicism, accompanied by Yajirō, who converted and was given the name Paul.[9] He arrived in Japan in 1549, just six years after the first European travel to Japan, and founded the Jesuit mission in the country, headquartered on Kyushu, the southern-most of Japan's main islands. In 1551, Xavier left Japan, aiming to visit China and spread his faith there, but he died of illness on an island off the Chinese coast the next year. From 1549 to 1552, Xavier sent letters about Japan to his Catholic companions in Asia and in Europe, which are some of the earliest first-hand European descriptions of the archipelago and its people.

Xavier entered Japan during a divided and bellicose period for the country. The sixteenth century was a transformative time for Japan: for most of the century, the country was in a chaotic state of decentralized civil war, but by the year 1600 the Tokugawa warrior family was nearing the completion of a long struggle for unification and the recreation of a powerful central government. Since the twelfth century, Japanese emperors (*tennō*) had been largely reduced to figureheads, with political power held by the shogunates, warrior governments so-called because of the head warrior official's title of shogun (*shōgun*). By the sixteenth century, the Ashikaga family, despite holding onto the title of shogun, had lost most of its authority over its ostensible vassals: the numerous local lords (*daimyō*) ruling smaller territories across Japan. These warrior lords frequently clashed over territory and local power, hence the title of "Warring States period" (*sengoku jidai*) often given to much of Japan's fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (roughly 1467-1600). Kyushu was a particularly unstable region, where powerful local families violently clashed with each other and their own vassals.[10] But, as Jurgis Elisonas argues, it was the instability of Japan itself which allowed Christian missionaries to make any headway at all: the missionaries were able to get some local rulers on their side, but as the country was reunified, they and their religion were rejected by Japanese authorities.[11] From

8 Jurgis Elisonas, "Christianity and the Daimyo," in *The Cambridge History of Japan Volume 4: Early Modern Japan*, edited by John Whitney Hall, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 303.

9 Bangert, *History of the Society of Jesus*, 33.

10 Elisonas, "Christianity and the Daimyo," 304-307.

11 George Elison, *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 2.

the very beginning, the status of the Jesuit mission was tied up with domestic Japanese political conflicts.

Xavier's earliest letter from Japan emphasizes his belief that the Japanese were well-suited to convert to Christianity. In a November 1549 letter, sent to his companions in Goa, a Portuguese-controlled port city in India, Xavier writes about the people of Japan as "the best that have as yet been discovered," adding that "it seems to me that no other pagan race will be found that will surpass the Japanese. They have, as a race, very fine manners; and they are on the whole good and not malicious."[12] According to Xavier, the trait of the Japanese that will be particularly beneficial to missionaries is their rationality: "they take great delight in hearing about the things of God, especially when they understand them. […] They are delighted with hearing things that are conformed to reason."[13] Because of the Japanese inclination to reason, Xavier argues, they are particularly receptive to the rational truth expressed by Christianity. In Xavier's view, despite the Japanese adherence to "pagan" religions, they are naturally inclined to goodness and right belief. In this view of the Japanese religious world, all that the Jesuits needed to do was send missionaries capable of explaining Christianity to Japanese, who were likely to convert upon hearing of something so "rational."

Xavier uses his description of the Japanese people to provide his readers further encouragement to join the Japanese mission. He explicitly tells his companions to "be ready, since it is quite likely that I shall write to you before the end of two years that many of you should come to Japan."[14] According to Xavier, the mission is not just a method to convert the people of Japan but also a spiritual opportunity for the missionaries themselves: "We formerly thought that we would render him [God] some service in coming to these regions for the increase of his holy faith; but now, through his goodness, he has made us clearly understand and feel the immense grace which he has conferred upon us by bringing us to Japan."[15] Xavier himself can be said to have reaped great spiritual benefits from his missionary efforts in Asia: he posthumously achieved the honor of sainthood in 1622. Xavier here combines description and persuasion: according to him, the people in Japan are ripe for conversion, and his companions in Goa can play an important role in helping the mission. By doing so, they will be part of something meaningful and spiritually fruitful.

In a 1552 letter from Cochin, another Portuguese colony in India, to

---

12 Francis Xavier, *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, translated and introduced by M. Joseph Costelloe. (Brighton, MA: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 297.
13 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 298.
14 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 300.
15 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 307.

Europe, Xavier continued to stress the potential for Catholic gains in Japan and requested that more Jesuits travel to the country. In this letter, Xavier describes his and his fellow missionaries' preaching and travels around Japan. Like in his 1549 letter to Goa, Xavier emphasizes the success of his teachings because of their fitting with rationality and their superiority to those of the "bonzes," or Buddhist monks: he writes that "the bonzes were greatly distressed when they saw that many had become Christians. […] because it had seemed to them that the law of God was more consonant with reason than their own."[16] Xavier is complimentary of these Japanese converts, particularly those from the upper classes, writing that "after they had become Christians, they were such great friends of ours that I could never end writing about it."[17] He plans to keep up this success through steady new missionary arrivals: "if it pleases God our Lord, priests of the Society will come every year to Japan."[18] Xavier's depiction of Japanese would have been encouraging to his readers, who themselves may have been called on to come join the mission. In Xavier's account, the potential for conflicts with pre-existing Japanese religion is hardly troubling: Japanese people are quickly understanding Christianity and converting, leaving the bonzes helpless.

Xavier's letters were often meant to be shared among many readers and even printed and published. His letters were generally of two types: private letters to individuals or public letters written for circulation.[19] Neither of the two letters described above are addressed to a specific person: the former is addressed generally to companions in Goa while the latter is to companions in Europe. According to M. Joseph Costelloe, Xavier's public letters "were eagerly read, copied, recopied, and translated into Latin and other languages."[20] Through these letters, Xavier introduced much of the Jesuit world, from Asia to Europe, to Japan. His message matched his audience: when he asked for more Jesuits to be sent to Japan, those same Jesuits were likely reading his letters. Xavier's optimistic description of Japanese people as rational and ready to convert reassured missionaries being sent to Japan by telling them that their efforts and arguments in support of Catholicism will not be in vain.

Xavier discusses some of the challenges he expects Jesuits in Japan will face in other letters, sent to high-ranking members of the Society of Jesus. These private letters have the same overall point as Xavier's public letters, but they place more emphasis on the difficulties facing the mission. In a 1552 letter to

---

16 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 333.

17 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 333.

18 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 340.

19 M. Joseph Costelloe, Introduction to *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, by Francis Xavier, translated and introduced by M. Joseph Costelloe, (Brighton, MA: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), xxiv.

20 Costelloe, Introduction to *Letters and Instructions*, xxiv.

Ignatius of Loyola, who led the Society from Rome, Xavier writes that "the land of is well disposed for Christianity to be perpetuated by itself among the people there," so he hopes that Ignatius will "send holy persons from there to Japan."[21] But Xavier notably adds that the perpetuation of Christianity "will require very great labors."[22] Elsewhere in the letter, Xavier discusses the difficulties of preaching in Japan and the qualifications he thinks are necessary for Jesuit priests to succeed there: "those who go there will suffer great persecutions. […] They will be pestered by visits and questions at all hours of the day. […] There is a need for trained scholars."[23] In this letter to his superior and longtime friend, Xavier is franker about the challenges the Jesuits face in Japan. Xavier adopted a similar tone in a letter to a fellow founding Jesuit and longtime companion, Simão Rodrigues (1510-1579), stationed in Portugal. Xavier writes to Rodrigues that "it would be good to indicate some of the trials which the brothers going to Japan will have to endure. […] They will be engaged in endless disputes with some and then others; they will be greatly despised. […] It will even happen that they will not have time to eat or sleep."[24] Because of these challenges, Xavier asks Rodrigues to ensure that the priests sent to Japan are particularly robust.[25] Xavier does not change his overall viewpoint that the mission in Japan has the potential for great success, but he mediates his message based on who his intended audience is. Although his public letters are more positive, his correspondences with top Jesuits show more pragmatic concerns about the mission and its needs.

Francis Xavier's letters on Japan served rhetorical purposes for the Jesuit mission. The Jesuit missionary wrote frequently on his belief that a mission in Japan would find success and was a worthwhile enterprise for the Society of Jesus. This message is most prominent in his public letters, which were circulated among Jesuits and other interested parties. In these letters, Xavier is not just describing his own beliefs and experiences but also broadcasting a message of confidence to his readers, some of whom may have been personally selected to join the Japanese mission. In his private letters to higher ranking Jesuits, on the other hand, Xavier emphasizes the challenges of the mission to support his request to the Society's leadership that they send particularly capable priests to Japan. Xavier, in creating a hopeful view of the prospects of the mission, encourages his readers to share in his confidence and take particular action to contribute.

The Deus Debate: Luis Frois and Depicting Religious Conflict in the Late Sixteenth Century

21 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 347.
22 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 347.
23 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 345-346.
24 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 350.
25 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 350.

In the decades following Xavier's arrival in Japan, the Jesuit mission made significant gains across the disunified archipelago. Jesuit missionaries made a particular effort to appeal to politically powerful men, and in 1578 they secured the conversion of the powerful Kyushu warlord Ōtomo Sōrin (1530-1587), given the name Francisco. Jurgis Elisonas writes that the conversion of Ōtomo "marked the apex of Christian proselytizing activity in Japan."[26] In 1580, another Christian lord in Kyushu, Ōmura Sumitada (1533-1587), baptized as Don Bartolomeu, fearing the imminent takeover of his lands by a rival lord, went so far as to grant the Society of Jesus territory in Japan: the port city of Nagasaki.[27] These convert warlords understood that there were political benefits that came along with conversion in the form of improved access to trade with Portuguese merchants, mediated by the Jesuits.[28] In their relationships with these Kyushu warlords, the Jesuits benefited from Japan's disunity: Japanese local leaders were able to act independently and seek their own benefit when dealing with Christianity. In large part because of the efforts of Jesuits, Japan's Christian population reached about 300,000 by the end of the sixteenth century, and William Wayne Farris estimates that Japan's population was around 15 million to 17 million in 1600, meaning the Christian population may have been up to about two percent of the total.[29] Michael Cooper argues that the reasons for Japanese conversions to Christianity included the "top-down" strategies of the missionaries pressuring members of local populations to convert upon the conversion of their lord, the violent state of politics giving people reason to seek a sort of refuge in religion, and the zeal of the missionaries who believed official conversion was the only way to save Japanese people from eternal damnation.[30]

Despite their mission's successes, Jesuit missionaries faced major challenges. There were never more than fifty Jesuit priests in Japan at once.[31] Such limited manpower was a serious problem for a mission with lofty goals and thousands of converts, but the Society was reluctant to consider accepting Japanese Christians as full missionaries.[32] Starting in the 1590s, the Jesuits began to receive reinforcements in the form of missionaries from other Catholic orders, most notably the Franciscans, but this sparked conflict. Different orders had different missionary attitudes and strategies: in general, Jesuits criticized Franciscans for being too brazen in light of increasing opposition from the Japanese government, while Franciscans criticized Jesuits for diluting their message

26 Elison, *Deus Destroyed*, 24.
27 Elisonas, "Christianity and the Daimyo," 329.
28 Elisonas, "Christianity and the Daimyo," 321.
29 Cooper, "A Mission Interrupted," 395; William Wayne Farris, *Japan's Medieval Population: Famine, Fertility, and Warfare in a Transformative Age*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 262.
30 Cooper, "A Mission Interrupted," 396-397.
31 Cooper, "A Mission Interrupted," 396.
32 Elison, *Deus Destroyed*, 14.

with excessive caution and accommodation.[33] The question of accommodation, however, was also a subject of debate within the Society of Jesus. The Mission Superior of Japan from 1570 to 1581, a Portuguese priest named Francisco Cabral (1529-1609), disagreed with Xavier's assessment of Japanese people as rational and well suited to Christianity and refused to allow Japanese Christians anything more than a few menial, low-ranking positions in the Society.[34] The Italian priest Alexandro Valignano (1539-1606), another high-ranking Jesuit, came to Japan in 1579 and opposed Cabral's policies, overseeing the establishment of institutions to educate Japanese Christians for more meaningful positions.[35] Still, the Jesuits never totally formed a consensus about how the mission should accommodate local customs and incorporate local converts: M. Antoni Ucerler writes that "the idea of accommodation and its limits continued to engender controversy throughout the second half of the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth century."[36] Around the start of 1580s, the Jesuit mission in Japan was making progress but in need of personnel and ideological support.

Of Japan's two main religious traditions, Shintō, the worship of native Japanese gods (*kami*), and Buddhism, imported from mainland Asia about a millennium prior and divided into various sects, Jesuit missionaries saw the latter, and its monks, or "bonzes," as their greatest spiritual rival.[37] Initially, however, linguistic and cultural misunderstanding brought Buddhism and Christianity together. Initially, Xavier mistakenly used unfitting Buddhist terminology he learned from his companion Paul to explain his religion in Japanese, which, along with the fact that Xavier had come from India, the land of the historical Buddha, made it difficult for Japanese listeners to realize this foreign priest was not preaching a kind of Buddhism.[38] To avoid such confusion, the missionaries began to use the Latin word "Deus" to refer to God instead of using Japanese terms. Even well after Jesuit missionaries had realized this error in terminology, the above-mentioned Luis Frois, one of the most prolific missionary writers and author of a history of the mission, remarked of Buddhists in 1575 that "if you accepted their terms and propositions at face value without any further discussion, you would think that they are talking about the one, supreme, true God, Saviour of the world. But in their reasoning and conclusions, all this is a delusion."[39] Jesuits did not view every Buddhist monk and practice with hostility.

33 Alonge, *A History of Jesuit Missions in Japan*, 66-68.
34 Elison, *Deus Destroyed*, 15.
35 Elison, *Deus Destoyed*, 16-18.
36 Ucerler, *The Samurai and the Cross*, 98.
37 Michael Cooper, "The Early Jesuits in Japan and Buddhism," in *Portuguese Voyages to Asia and Japan in the Renaissance Period*, edited by Peter Millward, (The Renaissance Institute, Sophia University, 1993), 54.
38 Elisonas, "Christianity and the Daimyo," 307-309.
39 Michael Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan: An Anthology of European Reports*

For example, Jesuit Balthasar Gago wrote in 1575 of Zen Buddhist meditators that "as they are intelligent, they solve many comparisons and good things until they become experts."[40] Nonetheless, the Jesuits generally saw Japanese religion as an enemy of truth and often as the work of evil forces. Another Jesuit missionary in Japan, Cosme de Torres, wrote that in Japan "they worship everything, including even the devil."[41]

Jesuit missionaries' general opposition to Buddhism did not mean that they did not attempt to understand the religion. Japanese Buddhism in the sixteenth century was divided into various schools with differing religious approaches. Buddhist temples had, to varying degrees, independent commercial and military power, although during the Warring States period many lost some of their privileges in conflicts with local lords.[42] Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), the first of the three unifiers of Japan, fought a fierce war (Ishiyama Hoganji War, 1570-1580) against elements of the True Pure Land sect (*jōdo shinshū*), which Neil McMullin describes as "the major conflict of the entire Sengoku [Warring States] period."[43] Even excluding the activities of the Christian missionaries, the role of Buddhism in sixteenth century Japan was intensely contested. The Jesuits tried to understand the complexities of Japanese religion in order to combat it: Michael Cooper explains that "as regards the history and doctrines of Buddhism, various missionaries were remarkably knowledgeable."[44] A Japanese-Portuguese dictionary from 1603-1604, containing technical explanations of many Buddhist terms, demonstrates the scope of Jesuit learning about Buddhism.[45] But the Jesuits did not always express the intricacies of their knowledge about their rival faith in their writings. Their commentary on Buddhist doctrine and on disputes with monks are typically dismissive, as seen in some of Luis Frois's writings.

Frois's 1585 pedagogical treatise on contrasts between Europe and Japan demonstrates how Jesuit missionaries depicted Japan and religion to European audiences. This work is referred to as the *Tratado* (treatise), an abbreviation of its first line.[46] Although it does not have Frois's name on it, it is generally agreed that the *Tratado* is written by Frois because of its similarities to other works of his.[47] The contents of Frois's *Tratado*, as Daniel T. Reff argues, indi-

---

on Japan, 1543-1640, (Oakland: University of California Press, 1965), 373-374.

40 Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan,* 316.

41 Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan,* 317.

42 Neil McMullin, *Buddhism and the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 42.

43 McMullin, *Buddhism and the State*, 46.

44 Cooper, "Jesuits in Japan and Buddhism," 45.

45 Cooper, "Jesuits in Japan and Buddhism," 46-47.

46 Frois, *The First European Description of Japan*, 31.

47 Reff, Introduction to *The First European Description of Japan*, 6-7.

cate that it is a pedagogical tool designed to educate Jesuits about Japan.[48] Reff interprets Frois's treatise as contributing to Alexandro Valignano's more accommodating missionary strategies: "certainly the substance of the Tratado is consistent with Valignano's plan to train European Jesuits to behave as Japanese."[49] Although Jurgis Elisonas, describes the *Tratado* as "a booklet of amazing banality," it is notable for its striking portrayal of Japanese Buddhism.[50] As Reff argues, Frois is generally "neutral or explicitly respectful of Japanese customs," but his sections on Buddhism are some of the most pointedly negative.[51] Michael Cooper writes that in Jesuit writings for a European audience "the Christian endeavor is normally described in optimistic and rosy terms, while conversely a dark picture of Buddhism and its monks is painted."[52] The *Tratado* is a prime example of this.

The *Tratado* depicts Buddhism as straightforwardly wrong and evil. Frois flatters his Jesuit readers by putting their motives and character above their Buddhist counterparts, writing that "among us, men enter religious life in order to do penance and to save their souls; the bonzes enter religious life to live in pleasure and ease and to escape hardships."[53] According to Frois, the bonzes are in service of some higher power, but not the right one: he writes that "above all things we abhor and abominate the devil; the bonzes venerate and worship him, building temples and making great sacrifices to him."[54] Like other Jesuits, Frois makes sense of Japanese religion for his readers by placing it in a Christian framework, but on the side of evil, rather than simply dismissing it as an alternate, mistaken set of beliefs. Frois dedicates very little space in his treatise to doctrinal differences between Christianity and Buddhism, instead focusing on supposed differences in the character and behavior of clergymen and on more superficial differences, writing, for example, "our churches are long and narrow; temples in Japan are broad and shallow."[55] The *Tratado* assures Jesuit arrivals in Japan that in their contestations with Buddhists they will be confronting both falsehood and immorality. Even if the realities of religious argumentation turned out to be more difficult and exhausting, the *Tratado*'s depiction of Buddhism seems to aim to instill readers with zeal and confidence.

Frois's depiction of his own religion in the *Tratado* also serves a rhetorical purpose; he emphasizes unity and an ecumenical spirit while downplaying religious differences in Europe. Although the treatise is about the differences

---

48 Reff, Introduction to *The First European Description of Japan*, 16.
49 Reff, Introduction to *The First European Description of Japan*, 16.
50 Elisonas, *Deus Destroyed*, 17.
51 Reff, Introduction to *The First European Description of Japan*, 19.
52 Cooper, "Jesuits in Japan and Buddhism," 43.
53 Frois, *The First European Description of Japan*, 93.
54 Frois, *The First European Description of Japan*, 103.
55 Frois, *The First European Description of Japan*, 111.

between Europe in general and Japan, not just Catholic lands, Frois writes that "we profess only one God, one faith, one baptism and one Catholic Church."[56] But the ideal of "one faith" was heavily contested in sixteenth century Europe, and the Jesuit order itself stridently opposed enemies of Catholicism in Europe just as it did in Japan. Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola wrote in a 1554 letter to ask a German Jesuit leader to pass on advice to the Austrian king on to deal with Protestant Christians: "preachers of heresy, heretical leaders, and (finally) all those found infecting others with the plague of heresy should be severely punished."[57] Although arriving Jesuits would have been well aware of the religious conflicts in Europe, Frois chooses to emphasize unity as a strength of European religion.

In the *Tratado*, Frois also minimizes conflict within the Catholic Church. He writes that "among us, there is no hatred between one religious order and another; the bonzes of one sect abhor those of other sects."[58] But inter-order conflict did exist in sixteenth century Catholicism, and Frois experienced it first-hand. John Patrick Donnelly goes as far as to write that "few groups in history have inspired such enthusiastic praise or such bitter hatred as the Jesuits," and that bitter hatred sometimes came from fellow Catholics.[59] Early Spanish Jesuit Juan Polanco (1517-1576) wrote of an influential Catholic friar in Spain that in 1548: "the conviction that both Ignatius and his companions were the precursors of the Anti-Christ began to become seated in heart."[60] Conflict between Jesuits and other Catholic orders was also prominent in Japan. Frois himself criticized what he saw as a lack of caution on the part of the Franciscans in the years following the writing of the *Tratado*, when Japanese authorities began to adopt a less accommodating stance towards Christianity.[61] Frois's treatise, however, de-emphasizes European religious conflicts compared to Japanese ones, depicting not only his own Church but European religion broadly as, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church."

Jesuit missionaries did describe how some Japanese challenged their theology. Xavier noted that Japanese Buddhists objected to the doctrine of an eternal hell, writing that "they deemed it a very great evil on the part of God that

56 Frois, *The First European Description of Japan*, 102.

57 Ignatius of Loyola, "Loyola's Letter to Canisius on How King Ferdinand Should Oppose Protestantism in Austria," in *Jesuit Writings of the Early Modern Period, 1540-1640*, edited and translated by John Patrick Donnelly (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 135.

58 Frois, *The First European Description of Japan*, 108.

59 John Patrick Donnelly, *Jesuit Writings of the Early Modern Period, 1540-1640* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 231.

60 Juan Polanco, Selections from *Chronicon*, in *Jesuit Writings of the Early Modern Period, 1540-1640*, edited and translated by John Patrick Donnelly (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 234.

61 Alonge, *A History of Jesuit Missions in Japan*, 66-67.

men who go to hell should never be redeemed, saying that their laws were more based upon mercy than was the law of God."[62] According to Xavier, his conception of hell was troubling to Japanese Christians as well, who were saddened to hear that their deceased loved ones would suffer for eternity. Xavier writes that although he sympathized with the converts' sorrow, he taught "that there is no remedy for them."[63] Juan Fernandez (1526-1567), a Spanish Jesuit who came to Japan with Xavier, reported similar challenges from Japanese questioning the Christian God's goodness: "they said that if God was merciful and created men for heaven, why did he let the devil do them so much evil?"[64] But Jesuits generally depicted themselves as having the answers to these and other questions about their faith, as seen in one of Frois's accounts of religious debate.

Frois recounts an argument he and a companion had with a Buddhist monk in front of Oda Nobunaga, a powerful warlord and the first unifier of Japan. The debate was held in 1569, and Frois's opponent was a monk named Nichijō of the Nichiren sect (*nichiren shū)*.[65] According to Frois, he upset Nichijō by proving the existence and immortality of the human soul. In a 1575 letter, Frois writes that he argued that "all compounds resolve themselves into the parts from which they were made; but the soul was not a compound; therefore, it had nothing to resolve itself into."[66] It is unclear how Japanese observers would have interpreted an argument of Scholastic philosophy like this one; Michael Cooper writes that Frois's syllogism was "unlikely to cut much ice in Japan."[67] However Nichijō understood this argument, he disagreed strongly: Frois writes that "the bonze rose up gnashing his teeth and the colour of his face changed in his rage and frenzy."[68] In Frois's view, the host of this debate, Nobunaga, was neither a sincere Buddhist nor a Christian: "he despises the *kami* [Japanese gods] and the *hotoke* [Buddhas] and all other pagan superstitions. […] He openly denies the existence of a creator of the universe, the immortality of the soul and life after death."[69] Frois writes that in his rage, Nichijō threatened to kill Frois's companion but that the neutral observer Nobunaga "laughed […] and told the bonze to be off, saying that such conduct in his presence was a grave discourtesy."[70] According to Frois, he clearly and easily won this argument, in his own view and in the view of Japan's most powerful man.

Frois's description of a debate between himself and a bonze demon-

62 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 334.
63 Xavier, *Letters and Instructions*, 341.
64 Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan,* 376.
65 Cooper, "Jesuits in Japan and Buddhism," 50.
66 Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan,* 379.
67 Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan,* 381.
68 Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan,* 379.
69 Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan,* 93.
70 Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan,* 379.

strates how the Jesuits could display the conflict between Christianity and Buddhism as one-sided to make the victory of their own faith look assured. In his letter, Frois is recounting a historical event that he took part in, but the way he describes the debate is also well suited as a demonstration of the mission's strength for a Jesuit reader of his letter. Frois depicts this discussion as demonstrating the natural superiority of Christianity: a bonze was thrown into an irrational rage after hearing his reasoned argument, although Frois's rhetoric was more suited to a European audience than a Japanese one. Nobunaga, an atheist according to Frois, recognized that the Christian side had won out in the discussion.

Jesuit depictions of Buddhism and its competition with Christianity in Japan serve to make it appear as if the latter is obviously and rationally superior. In his *Tratado* for fellow European Jesuits, Luis Frois describes Christianity in good light and Buddhism in bad one, but, importantly, he represents that the former is strong and unified while the latter is weak and divided. The supposed weakness of Buddhism is manifest in Frois's writings about his debate with Nichijō, where the monk can only respond to Frois's reason with violence. Like Xavier's letters describing Japanese receptiveness to Christianity, these works from Frois are for a European audience. Frois did not need to convince his readers that Christianity is true, but he did argue to them that it had an advantage over its competition in the context of Japan. Frois's writings have some of the same rhetorical aims as Xavier's: by depicting a united and rational Christianity which naturally triumphs over Japanese Buddhism, he too paints an optimistic picture of the mission's future to his fellow Jesuits.

Persecution and Rhetoric of Tokugawa-era Jesuits

Changes in domestic Japanese politics set in motion the fall of the Jesuit mission in Japan. Japan's newly reunified central government began to oppose Christianity under Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), the second unifier, who succeeded Nobunaga after his assassination in 1582. Hideyoshi aimed to complete the political and military reunification of Japan that Nobunaga initiated, and to accomplish this he invaded Kyushu in 1587, subjugating the local lords whose disunity had allowed the Jesuits to get a foothold on the island. Before his conquest of Kyushu, Hideyoshi had agreed to tolerate the Jesuits and had personally received them warmly, although he distrusted them.[71] The lesson from his predecessor's extended conflict with True Pure Land Buddhism was not lost on Hideyoshi; he saw independently powerful religious groups as a threat to the project of unification.[72] The Tokugawa shogunate which succeeded Hideyoshi would adopt a similar view of Christianity as potentially damaging to national unity and stability. In 1587, Hideyoshi shocked the Jesuits by issuing

71 Elisonas, "Christianity and the Daimyo," 348-349.
72 Elisonas, "Christianity and the Daimyo," 361.

an edict expelling them from the country, but he did not enforce it strictly, and missionaries in Japan mostly became more discreet rather than leaving altogether.[73] In 1597, Hideyoshi had twenty-six Christians crucified in Nagasaki, seventeen Japanese and nine European, but aside from this instance of persecution he primarily spent the rest of his life focused on his ill-fated attempt to conquer Korea and China (Imjin War, 1592-1598).[74]

Japanese political leaders of the early seventeenth century turned the situation of the Jesuits into a dire one. Tokugawa Ieyasu, the final unifier, and his successors carried out the final expulsion and persecutions of Christians in Japan. In the wake of the aggressive campaigns of his predecessor, Ieyasu attempted to re-establish Japan’s standing in the East Asian world by being generally active and accommodating diplomatically.[75] At the same time, the early Tokugawa shogunate continued the lax enforcement of anti-Christian policies.[76] In 1614, however, the second Tokugawa shogun, Tokugawa Hidetada (r. 1605-1623), issued another statement expelling missionaries from the country. The 1614 anti-missionary statement, unlike Hideyoshi’s 1587 version, was strictly enforced, although missionaries tried to continue the Japanese mission in spite of brutal persecution.[77] In 1639, Tokugawa Iemitsu (r. 1623-1651), Hidetada’s son and the third Tokugawa shogun, issued an edict expelling the Portuguese altogether for the stated reason that “they have secretly transported those who are going to propagate that religion [Christianity].”[78] During the reigns of Hidetada and Iemitsu, European missionaries and Japanese Christians were executed, forced to give up the faith, or went into hiding.

The global Catholic Church used the persecution of Christians in Japan rhetorically. The 1597 crucifixions at Nagasaki were the subject of numerous accounts, both historical chronicles and more artistic renditions, distributed across the Catholic world throughout the 17th century.[79] Guillame Alonge argues that these writings were in part based on “the desire to attract new missionaries and obtain funds from generous patrons for the mission.”[80] Like earlier Jesuit writings from Japan, these accounts of Christian persecution were created for European audiences to help the mission. But the stories of the Japanese martyrs

73 Elisonas, “Christianity and the Daimyo,” 360-363.
74 Elisonas, “Christianity and the Daimyo,” 364-365.
75 Adam Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 50-52.
76 Elisonas, “Christianity and the Daimyo,” 365.
77 Elisonas, “Christianity and the Daimyo,” 368.
78 “Exclusion of the Portuguese,” 1639, in *Voices of Early Modern Japan*: *Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life During the Age of the Shoguns*, Constantine Vaporis, (ABC-CLIO, 2012), 97.
79 Alonge, *A History of Jesuit Missions in Japan*, 69.
80 Alonge, *A History of Jesuit Missions in Japan*, 69.

also served a purpose outside of Japan. Alonge writes that, through the Japanese mission, "Roman Catholicism was able to match the many Protestant martyrs with their own heroes – Catholics who died to defend the pope's doctrine in remote lands."[81] Accounts of martyrdom were unlikely to be convincing to Japanese non-Christians: it was difficult for many to accept that torture and execution, like that depicted in the passion narrative of Jesus, could be godly rather than just painful and humiliating.[82] But the self-sacrifice and imitation of Christ and the saints found in martyrdom was the perfect idiom for the Jesuits to appeal to European Catholics. One author, Portuguese priest João Rodrigues, however, took the opposite approach of martyrdom accounts and continued to depict the mission optimistically, but he too had rhetorical goals directed at a European audience.

Rodrigues (1561-1633) was one of the Jesuit mission in Japan's last prolific writers. Rodrigues arrived in Japan as a teenager and spent much of his life there until he was expelled from the country in 1610, four years before the expulsion of the entire mission.[83] Rodrigues was very skilled in the use of Japanese, and he wrote extensively about the language. As an interpreter, Rodrigues became personally acquainted with Hideyoshi and the first two Tokugawa shoguns.[84] After his expulsion, Rodrigues was tasked with writing a history of the mission in Japan, and from references in the extant text of this unfinished history, *História da Igreja do Japão*, it appears that he wrote most of it in 1620 but continued working on it until 1633.[85] Guillame Alonge argues that by the 1610s, "none of the remaining priests [in Japan] had the illusion that the signs sent from heaven could prefigure a radiant future for the faith of Christ."[86] But Rodrigues's *História* is one of last statements of Jesuit hopefulness about the mission in Japan previously expounded by Xavier and Frois.

Rodrigues wrote surprisingly optimistically about the status of Christianity in Japan in the seventeenth century, after his and the rest of his order's expulsion from the country. Like Xavier about seventy years before him, Rodrigues describes Japanese people as rational and accepting of Christianity. He writes that "it may be seen that in general the Japanese are very much ruled by natural reason and submit to it. [...] they understand the truth and are converted to the Faith, which they confess, however, very simply."[87] According

81 Alonge, *A History of Jesuit Missions in Japan*, 72.
82 Alonge, *A History of Jesuit Missions in Japan*, 34.
83 Michael Cooper, Introduction to *This Island of Japon: João Rodrigues' Account of 16th-Century Japan*, by João Rodrigues. translated and edited by Michael Cooper (Kodansha International, 1973), 11-15.
84 Michael Cooper, Introduction to *This Island of Japon*, 13-14.
85 Michael Cooper, Introduction to *This Island of Japon*, 19-20.
86 Alonge, *A History of Jesuit Missions in Japan*, 65.
87 João Rodrigues, *This Island of Japon: João Rodrigues' Account of 16th-Cen-*

to Rodrigues, Japanese people are particularly pious, previously towards Buddhism, but increasingly towards Christianity: "since the Holy Gospel has been introduced to Japan, this devotion and fervour towards the idols has been greatly cooling among the people, for they have been continually hearing about the truth and this is dispelling the darkness."[88] Rodrigues also depicts the unifiers' victory over independent Buddhist military and political power as a triumph for Christianity, writing that "idolatry flourished greatly in the two former periods […] but now it is destroying itself and the lords haven taken over all the revenues for themselves. [Idolatry's] falsity and worthlessness is being manifested by the light of the Holy Gospel."[89] While the triumph of the unifiers actually hastened the doom of the mission, Rodrigues portrays political changes in Japan positively.

Rodrigues emphasizes his point about Japan's inclination to Christianity with a reference to the Old Testament. He writes that:

> It seems that on account of the good inclination and interest which they [the Japanese] have in their hearts for the things of salvation and the other life, Our Lord has had mercy on this nation, and leaving to one side many other nations He has come to the end of the world searching for them. And they seem literally to be those people whom Isaias mentions in Chapter 18: Go, ye swift angels to a waiting people, beyond whom there are no others.[90] [Isaiah 18:2]

In incorporating Japan into scripture, Rodrigues employs a strategy common in premodern European travel writing. Carl Thompson argues that historical works of travel writing use make use of "epistemological decorum," or signifiers within a work that are supposed to show that it is reporting accurate information. According to Thompson, "in medieval times, the plausibility and reliability of travel accounts was usually assessed in relation to the account of the world provided by a well-defined canon of established authorities."[91] While the *História* is not "medieval" chronologically, Rodrigues connects his account to the canon to make his point. He lends credibility in the eyes of his readers to his, and Xavier's, point that Japan is particularly naturally inclined towards Christianity by arguing that the existence of such a place, at the "end of the world" no less, is supported by the Bible.

Rodrigues's intended audience is important to understanding his purpose in writing the *História*. Rodrigues himself argues in his preface that the

---

tury Japan, translated and edited by Michael Cooper (Kodansha International, 1973), 65.

88 Rodrigues, *This Island of Japon*, 71.

89 Rodrigues, *This Island of Japon*, 80.

90 Rodrigues, *This Island of Japon*, 71.

91 Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 72.

work could be useful in encouraging recruitment and funding for the mission.[92] By the 1620s and 1630s, it is doubtful that any such funds or manpower that *História* could have sparked would have been of any use in Japan, but a long-time missionary and resident in Japan like Rodrigues would not have wanted to abandon hope for the country. Rodrigues's optimistic statements about Christianity's future in Japan can also be seen as "epistemological decorum," like his scriptural references. Although it was never completed and published, Rodrigues intended the *História* to introduce Japan to a European, mostly Catholic audience. Rodrigues's readers, even though they would have known about the persecutions and martyrdoms in Japan, would have expected and wanted to hear that their faith, contested both outside and inside of Europe, was making gains among Japanese people because of its inherent truth.

During and after the Japanese government's crushing of the Catholic mission in Japan, Jesuit writings continued to serve rhetorical purposes. Globally, the Church used the episode of Catholic persecution in Japan as a symbol of martyrdom and dedication to the faith in a time of religious conflict in Europe. Authors like Rodrigues continued to try to support the mission in Japan itself with their writing, even as the Tokugawa government violently stamped out Christianity. Rodrigues's *História* shows the continuation of a Jesuit culture of optimism and confidence about Japan, at least on paper, well after events on the ground gave missionaries good reason to abandon such hopes.

Engelbert Kaempfer's writings from the late seventeenth century show some of the longer-term impacts of Jesuit rhetoric. Kaempfer (1651-1716) was a German physician who in 1691 and 1692 travelled in Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate with the Dutch East India Company, the only Europeans permitted in the country. Kaempfer describes Tokugawa Japan's absolute rejection of Christianity: he explains that all Japanese officials who dealt with the Dutch were required to take a blood oath of loyalty and secrecy and to trample Christian iconography every new year.[93] Kaempfer criticizes the Catholic missionaries of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries who, he writes, brought on their own persecution by "not just hankering after souls but also after money and land."[94] Kaempfer, however, also asserts that "the Japanese had a natural fondness for the Portuguese" and that "nearly the whole country was converted."[95] (As stated above, the Christian population of Japan does not seem to have ever exceeded around 2%.) Even decades after the destruction of the Catholic mission in Japan, Kaempfer echoes a similar sentiment as earlier Jesuit authors: that the Japanese mission was on the path to success.

---

92 Michael Cooper, Introduction to *This Island of Japon*, 17.

93 Engelbert Kaempfer, *Kaempfer's Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed*. edited, translated, and annotated by Beatrice M. Bodart-Bailey (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 195-196.

94 Kaempfer, *Kaempfer's Japan*, 182.

95 Kaempfer, *Kaempfer's Japan*, 180.

Conclusion

The works of Francis Xavier, Luis Frois, and João Rodrigues demonstrate a theme in Jesuit writing from early modern Japan: these texts, while expository, are also argumentative. Xavier depicted Japan as a land well-suited for Catholic gains, emphasizing the opportunity for success to potential future missionaries while focusing more on the challenges while writing to higher-ups. Frois worked to build confidence in the mission by portraying the conflict between Christianity and Buddhism as one-sided to his fellow Jesuits. Rodrigues, writing for a European audience, continued to assert that the Christian mission in Japan would triumph, even in a time when its prospects looked bleak. Surely this theme of optimism was not just a rhetorical façade; these three men, who believed in the truth and power of their faith and dedicated their lives to spreading it, naturally would not have been inclined to pessimism about their project. But the Jesuit optimism about Japan embodied in their writings played to audiences of fellow Europeans and missionaries. These writers created a picture of a Japanese religious world which Christianity was set to eventually take over, a strategy which contributed to their goals of receiving support from and building confidence in their readers.

The rhetorical strategies employed by writers from the Jesuit mission in Japan demonstrate that these texts should not be studied as only an expression of the experiences and opinions of their authors but also of the relationship between author and audience. From these works, we can learn about what kind of descriptions of Japan their authors thought would be most suitable to a European audience considering the goals of the Catholic mission. Jesuit missionaries in Japan did not lose sight of the fact that they needed support from their fellow Europeans, so their texts contain methods of convincing those Europeans and fulfilling their expectations. The account of Japan provided by Jesuits cannot be cleanly separated from their goals and their audiences. The writings from the Jesuit mission in early modern Japan, like many other works of travel writing, are best understood not just through their writers, but also through their readers.

Jack Snyder is an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill majoring in history and Asian studies. He is writing a senior honors thesis about censorship in early modern Japan.

Book Reviews

The Sisterhood: How a Network of Black Women Writers Changed American Culture. By Courtney Thorsson. Columbia University Press, 2023. 296 pp.

Hannah Mariska Fuller

University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill

Courtney Thorsson's research springs forth from a single photo. First appearing in Evelyn White's *Alice Walker: A Life* (2004), the photo shows a group of Black women—Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, and other literary luminaries—posed around a framed photo of Bessie Smith. Entitled "The Sisterhood, 1977," the photo captures an organization of Black women writers in the late 1970s. Alice Walker explained that Bessie Smith "best expressed our feeling of being women who were free and women who intended to stay that way" (3). The photo has lived a life of its own—inspiring literary scholars and periodically making the rounds on social media. Like many, Thorsson recognized that the photo captured something important, and *The Sisterhood: How a Network of Black Women Writers Changed American Culture* aims to tell the story behind the photo and make a case for its significance.

Drawing from an array of archival sources, Thorsson gives historical texture and grounding to a photo that has lived in legend for too long. She does the arduous yet worthwhile work of illuminating the "everyday" labor of The Sisterhood to support each other, secure publication, and garner respect for Black women writers. Founded by Walker and June Jordan, the group sought to create solidarity amongst women who may have been pitted against each other by publishing houses, academia, and white feminist groups. They recognized that there was ample space for Black women writers, and the group actively sought lift one other up rather than compete against each other.

Thorsson walks the reader through the group's robust activity during its short two years of meeting. Although the group broke down due to internal disputes and external pressures, Thorsson argues that they certainly accomplished a lot for Black women in public and academic publishing. She views The Sisterhood's efforts as essential for the flowering of Black women's literature in the 1980s. Considering the group's success, she frames The Sisterhood as offering a model for collective action to change cultural institutions.

In addition to fostering kinship amongst members, the group aimed to change two spaces: publishing and academia. Despite the group's familial title, it functioned in a fairly formal manner with monthly meetings, member dues, and recorded minutes. They organized to expand Black women's publication opportunities, increase their presence in academia, and bolster respect for their literary contributions across genre. Thorsson begins by showing the connections between The Sisterhood, Black feminist activism, and the Black Arts Movement, which effectively reveals that the political vision and philosophy of the group take it far beyond a professional organization. By the 1970s, Black activists' optimism was stalled by the recession, the Black Power Movement's decline, and state divestment in social services. Public forms of activism abated alongside the declining material conditions for many Black Americans. The Sisterhood emerged in this moment of cynicism and struggle, using literature as a path for liberation when direct campaigns for legal and civil change appeared futile. They set their sights on bringing radical Black feminism to the publishing industry and academia.

To prove the success and importance of The Sisterhood, Thorsson tracks the work of its members during its short two-year run and the years following it. Using this flexible timeframe, Thorsson shows how the members changed the publishing industry by starting new publications, advancing Black women's positions in magazines, and bringing Black women's writing to white feminist magazines. Thorsson still does not shy from critiquing The Sisterhood and their approaches, which helps support her claim that studying the group can provide lessons about organizing for the future. Thorsson's analysis shines when she breaks down the short stories, novels, and poems to reveal the ideals of The Sisterhood. The success of The Sisterhood can be seen in the inclusion of Black feminism in academia, a burgeoning canon of Black women's literature, and the celebrity of a select few writers by the 1980s. However, Thorsson points out that this high point was short lived and elevated too few people.

In addition to linking The Sisterhood to the renaissance of Black women's literature in the 1980s, Thorsson claims that scholars and artists need to remain persistent in their activism and study of Black women's work. She cites "Audre Lorde's assertion that 'revolution is not a one-time event' because repeated erasure and resistance make it necessary to advocate for Black women's writing and chart Black feminist intellectual history again and again, including right now" (9). An example of this process of combatting erasure is the intersection between Black feminism and lesbian-feminism, which became less evident by the 1980s. The Sisterhood actively worked to support queer members and their political vision, but their lesbian-feminism, waned during the apex of Black women's fiction in the 1980s.

Thorsson makes an important contribution to literary history by telling the story behind the iconic 1977 photo. Her work strikes a balance between popular and academic history making it appealing to an interested public and valuable to scholars of social movements, literary history, and Black women's history. Thorsson marshals the methods of historians and literary scholars by combining vigorous archival research with literary analysis. Her excellent work could only be bolstered by further analysis of class and women writers as workers. A deeper analysis of how Black women writers' finances shaped their activism and whether The Sisterhood's work improved economic conditions for

Black women in publishing could have sharpened the already vivid picture of The Sisterhood.

Blue: A History of Postpartum Depression in America. By Rachel Louise Moran. University of Chicago Press, 2024. 304 pp.

Kathleen M. McHugh

University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill

Bringing home a new baby should be a joyful time in a mother's life, but as Rachel Louise Moran shows in *Blue: A History of Postpartum Depression in America*, the first scholarly analysis of postpartum depression, this was simply not the case for many new mothers. Focused on the second half of the twentieth century, Moran traces the recent history of postpartum depression in the United States, beginning with its categorization as the "baby blues" in the 1950s and ending with the creation of online support groups in the 2010s. In the process, she shows that many mothers experienced postpartum depression, which lacked a clear medical diagnosis, had minimal support from the medical community, and received a feeling of general indifference from American society.

Throughout, Moran presents two separate but often intersecting approaches: that of male doctors and psychologists who attempted to medicalize the condition and lend their legitimacy to spur more research and treatment, and activists, primarily mothers who struggled with postpartum depression themselves, who advocated for increased visibility and acceptance of the condition to provide support for postpartum mothers. These two groups often worked in tandem, with doctors providing legitimacy to the movement to recognize postpartum depression and activists pushing for greater public recognition of the condition, which allowed doctors to focus more time and resources on research and treatment. While these two groups sometimes collaborated, they often had different priorities on the best way to approach the problem. Mothers preferred support through activism and doctors advocated for more medical research, leading to a somewhat fractured, though still largely cooperative, relationship. By bridging women's history and history of medicine, Moran highlights how women's health and motherhood more broadly was shaped by social forces and attitudes as much as by professional, medical guidance. Through this analysis, Moran provides a window into how women grappled with ideas of motherhood in the latter half of the twentieth century and sought to normalize the more difficult aspects of early motherhood during a time when the family was highly politicized. Relying on thirty-five oral history interviews with activists and mothers, Moran highlights the centrality of these women in pushing for greater postpartum acceptance, support, and research.

Moving chronologically, Moran shows that mothers experiencing "baby blues" in the postwar era were largely ignored by doctors and their husbands. Women were encouraged to give themselves a little treat, such as buying a new hat to cheer themselves up rather than addressing any underlying causes of their mood changes (4). She then moves to the 1960s and 1970s, highlighting the complicated relationship between second-wave feminism and support for postpartum mothers. Moran shows how advocacy for mothers experiencing postpartum depression could align with other feminist goals such as women's health and addressing sexism. However, white feminists attempted to distance themselves from motherhood, and postpartum advocates insisted on forming alliances with medical professionals, who many feminists considered to be overly misogynistic because they prioritized their medical knowledge over feminists' lived experiences. A concrete relationship could, therefore, not be established, and feminists never shared a unified stance on the issue.

Moran marks the 1980s as a turning point in postpartum activism. Activists in this decade attempted to frame postpartum depression in the language of the family, the "national obsession of the era," to gain support from a wide range of women (91). This method successfully united liberal and conservative mothers who faced anxieties about the growing aspiration of the superwoman, which both groups understood could not actually be achieved. Further, it combined the conservative self-care ethos of the baby blues and liberal women's health rhetoric of second wave feminism, creating a distinctive strain of activism at that moment for that condition (104, 156). In addition, medical professionals also began to take the cause more seriously, leading to a surge in diagnoses. Moving into the 1990s, Moran shifts her focus from grassroots to top-down approaches to illustrate how postpartum depression became a much more recognizable, yet polarizing condition. Namely, she addresses how celebrities like Brooke Shields and other activists appeared on celebrity talk shows. These appearances not only publicized and sensationalized postpartum depression for the masses but also made the issue more approachable and posited it against ideas of "killer moms" driven to infanticide (172).

Moran consistently suggests that postpartum depression advocacy centered primarily around the experiences of white women and alienated women of color, but she addresses this in more detail in the last two chapters by following the growth of internet support communities. Online communities expanded the reach of postpartum depression advocates and further splintered the movement as women of color felt dismissed and unsupported by their white counterparts. However, while organized postpartum groups worked to address racism by adding more women of color to their boards, many non-white women chose to create their own groups that centered their unique experiences with the medical community (204).

As the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* still does not recognize postpartum depression as a unique disorder, Moran calls for the continuation of this combined approach of activism and medicalization. Concluding in 2023, Moran emphasizes how the fight for postpartum depression recognition and treatment is an ongoing struggle in a society that supposedly prioritizes family issues. While postpartum depression is only one barrier that mothers (and most parents) today face amidst limited and expensive childcare and minimal parental leave, Moran argues that it is necessary for women's pains to be taken seriously to accomplish any change (234).

Blue is a valuable contribution to women's history, histories of medicine and histories of social movements. Moran establishes a history of postpartum depression activism and pushes for medicalization and diagnosis and opens the door for future scholars to expand on her analysis, especially by looking at non-white women and placing postpartum depression within the wider historiography of medicine and psychology during this period.

The Paradox of Protection: The Making of Indirect Rule in Southern Sierra Leone, 1850-1915. By Trina Leah Hogg. Michigan State University Press, 2025. 246 pp.

Kaela E. Thuney

University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of protection became crucial to how both African leaders and British authorities negotiated the myriad meanings of law, governance, and power in southern Sierra Leone. Trina Hogg's *The Paradox of Protection* draws attention to how leaders gained and lost spiritual, political, and economic authority, articulated through the language of protection, in what became known as the Sierra Leone Protectorate. Negotiations around treaties of peace and commerce gave rise to what Hogg terms the "paradox of protection": African leaders, increasingly vulnerable in the face of colonial upheaval and the shifting goalposts of authority and law, formed uneven alliances with outsiders that left them "increasingly vulnerable to violence and political rivalry from competitors and strangers" (104). Hogg traces these vulnerabilities, demonstrating how British arbitrators and African authorities conceptualized and tested the boundaries of schemes that limited or circumvented traditional forms of rule and authority in Sierra Leone.

Hogg's first chapter examines debates that shaped protection beginning in the 1840s, situating Krio migration out of Freetown within longer histories of landlord-stranger relationships beyond the coast. Treaties between British authorities, traders, and local leaders laid the foundation for protection schemes that facilitated colonial expansion in the latter part of the century. Such analysis encourages readers to consider how the frameworks for indirect rule emerged, not in the late Victorian period, but as a result of these earlier negotiations. Treaties enabled the British to claim legal dominion over existing rulers, to draw boundaries between territories, and to lay the groundwork for structures of indirect governance vital to British rule. The next chapter explores how treaties of commerce and peace exacerbated this protection paradox, leaving traders and leaders vulnerable to exploitation and attack. African requests for protection inadvertently provided colonial lawmakers with opportunities to assert influence over and argue for the necessity of colonial policing, the annexation of territory, and judicial structures that paved the way for formal colonialism.

Chapter three highlights what became known as 'human leopard' murder trials, providing testimonies and court records to illustrate a period when rumors about deaths at the hands of those with supernatural power triggered the expansion of British protection schemes against 'antisocial medicines.' Such accusations were leveled by dependents against leaders, providing space for assertions of mismanagement while also demonstrating imbalances in socio-political power. Human-leopard murders and sensationalism around the holders of esoteric knowledge, called *Tongo,* were seen as antithetical to British efforts of protection. Like witches, human leopards "represented a societal threat that required immediate legal intervention to stabilize the political and supernatural environment" (54). Chapter four explores the 1898 Insurrection following the formal annexation and formation of the Sierra Leone Protectorate, often described as an uprising led by local leaders against new and disproportionate taxation policies. As Hogg demonstrates, the uprising was fueled not just by responses to changing tax structures but also by shifting structures of protection and governance in the Protectorate. The final chapter examines paramount chief elections and debates over leadership and belonging. Conflict over land and leadership was emblematic of "a fairly rapid shift from the flexible nature of precolonial governance to the more rigid institutions of indirect rule" (126). Hogg sheds light on contestations over protection, authority, and the shaping of legal and political structures in the transition to formal, indirect colonial rule.

The book includes maps showcasing how the construction and maintenance of borders factored into the turbulent transition from informal to formal colonial rule. They lend insight into the movements of people, ideas, and rumors, drawing attention to how African leaders conceptualized and incorporated ideas of protection into their strategies vis-à-vis newcomers, outsiders, and strangers. While Europeans saw "protection as a top-down process administered by the empire— or even by a corporation, as in the case of the British East India company— protection in southern Sierra Leone was fundamentally incorporative" (xvi). Incorporative alliances hinged on the deployment of particular ideas about community, belonging, kinship, and dependency, allowing leaders to form networks of shared spiritual, financial, and legal institutions they used to make sense of the world around them.

The Paradox of Protection centers Africans intentionally in colonial legal histories, framing negotiations of power between leaders and outsiders in volatile, rapidly evolving political and economic environments. Hogg's examples, stories, and the actors the book features— Queen Betsy Gaye, Madam Yoko, the Caulker family, and many others—provide a human and dynamic narrative of legal history. Hogg's evocative and ethical treatment of these stories allows readers to grapple with the betrayals of colonial imposition and the stakes of treaty negotiations in changing colonial landscapes. It is not only African legal scholars who will find Hogg's extensive archival research and interventions useful; the book serves as a corrective to scholarship on global empires that treat the voices of Africans as unknown or unknowable. It will inspire scholarship on borderlands and frontiers in African studies, helping scholars reimagine the boundaries of power and the narratives of indirect rule. The book allows for a shift in perspectives on where exactly colonial power was constructed and maintained in Africa. While scholars often conceptualize the frontiers and boundaries of empire as empty, imagined spaces existing on the periphery, Hogg centers these spaces as vital to the processes of empire-making, detailing how the creation of uneven treaties and shifts in authority led to destabilization, annexation, and vulnerability in what became the Protectorate.

The Paradox of Protection is skillfully written, demonstrating how Africans navigated changing legal structures and why their strategies for dealing with shifting political and legal landscapes are crucial to our understanding of colonialism in West Africa and beyond. Shifting the reader's gaze away from Freetown, it demonstrates how different people—spiritual leaders, chiefs, landowners, traders, newcomers, and outsiders—reckoned with new systems of strategy-making on the frontiers of empire. It shows how some capitalized on chaos, making claims in new and profound ways. The book reveals just how improvisational empire building truly was across Sierra Leone, defined as it was by insurrection, contestation, and changing ideas about protection and power.

The Youngest Yugoslavs: An Oral History of Post-Socialist Memory.
By Jovana Babović. Indiana University Press, 2025. xi + 249 pp.

Elizabeth Wisniewski

University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill

Historians often refer to Yugoslavia as an experiment in alternatives, negotiating a middle ground between market capitalism and Soviet-style socialism. It was a country that imbued socialist aesthetics—the brutalist facades, Tito's personality cult, brotherhood and unity, worker self-management, and Pioneer uniforms—in conjunction with such staples of the capitalist West as blue jeans, vinyl records, and Coca-Cola signs.

1989 inaugurated a period of chaos and turmoil for Yugoslavia. As the country—and socialism by extension—collapsed, Yugoslavs were plunged into a state of limbo between new borders, contested memories, and shifting identities. In recent decades, historians have devoted attention to lived experiences under socialism, writing histories from below that challenge dominant narratives which ascribe the ethnic violence of the 1990s to the Balkan's "ancient ethnic hatreds." Yugoslav socialism, these histories suggest, offered an overarching identity and culture to unite different ethnic groups, reiterating the notion that ethnic difference did not render violence inevitable nor was it essential for violence.

Few have taken up the task of investigating socialism from the perspective of youth populations, particularly those now in the diaspora. In *The Youngest Yugoslavs: An Oral History of Post-Socialist Memory,* Jovana Babović, Associate Professor of History at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Geneseo, presents a collection of eight oral interviews with individuals reflecting on their childhood memories of Yugoslavia. Through this selection of interviews, Babović engages with Yugoslavia's diversity of class, religion, ethnicity, and identification with a multi-ethnic identity, displaying nuanced ways in which individuals remember socialism as it was dying and the Yugoslav legacies interviewees continue to carry.

Building upon the methodological framework developed by Donald Ritchie's *Doing Oral History* and Donald Raleigh's methodology for working with socialist memory in *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about their Lives,* Babović utilized a semi-structured approach to her interviews, asking neutral, open-ended questions that allowed for centering interviewees' reflections and honest engagement with their memories.[1] Through this approach, Babović's interviews read as personal, intimate conversations rather than investigative pursuits. Rather than offer her own analysis of the interviews, Babović chose to limit her contribution to providing "contextual grounding," with the aim of inviting "readers to engage with the voices of the youngest Yugoslav generation on their own terms" (9).

The book was also shaped indelibly by the sociopolitical moment of the coronavirus pandemic, as quarantine limited Babović's selection of interviewees to those referred to her through personal connections. The result was thirty-five interviews conducted virtually with individuals born in Yugoslavia between 1971 and 1991. While her narrators represent a diversity of experience that would have been difficult to capture through in-person interviews, Babović points out that, as a group, they are disproportionately educated and more likely to have a stronger investment in Yugoslavia than those who did not agree to an interview.

Although each interview encapsulates a unique Yugoslav story, certain themes are woven throughout the book, connecting conceptions of identity, community, and both the pitfalls and achievements of Yugoslav socialism. Many interviewees engaged critically with their memories of Yugoslavia, supplying personal moments of struggle, economic poverty, and discrimination. With the absence of minority representation in school curriculum, Elena Stavrevska, who spent most of her childhood in Macedonia, recalled only discovering Yugoslavia's history of discrimination towards ethnic minorities, namely Albanians and Roma, through her scholarly work. Stavrevska views learning this aspect of Yugoslav history as a personal responsibility, asserting "especially if this is a country I self-identity with, I'm meant to know these things" (172).

Narrators who lived as ethnic minorities in Yugoslavia offer critiques that

1 Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Donald Raleigh, *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives* (Indiana University Press, 2006).

are at once forthright and highly nuanced. Born in Macedonia to Albanian parents, Artan Sadiku attended a parallel Albanian-language school while living in a predominantly ethnically Macedonian neighborhood. Where one expects tension and discrimination, which was certainly present in the *de facto* economic and social segregation of Albanians from Macedonians, Sadiku found community: "Differences were not present even many years later when we were all grown up and in high school… Those friendships remain even up to now. Locally, the neighborhoods developed their own sense of cultural understanding, solidarity, and tolerance" (93). Sadiku and his fellow narrators mourn the loss of this sense of neighborliness, or *komšiluk*, by preserving it in memory as a treasured heirloom of the Yugoslav past.

An immense strength of the work is its presentation of the global network interviewees fostered both during and after Yugoslavia, with the diasporic community centering around a potent sense of a shared past. Although not identifying as Yugoslav, Krisztina Rácz, born in Serbia to Hungarian parents, recalls the global community she finds with individuals from the region, sharing "it's always somehow this Yugo crowd that I end up with, which is surprising to me. It's just what I said, that it's very important, at least in my case, what you grew up with… After a conference it would never occur to me to go and have a drink with Hungarians..." (84). Through these interviews, Babović articulates the triviality of ethnic or national identity in this diasporic cohort, indicating the ways in which communities, connections, and socialist legacies have been forged and felt outside of the region.

Babović's choice to present these interviews in an unmediated form is responsible for many of the book's strengths, but as an admirer of the author's historical scholarship on the region, I could not help but crave for more of her own analyses and commentary on the contents and contexts of interviews. The Yugoslav Wars appear to loom in the background of the interviews, yet they are rarely addressed or discussed directly, leaving questions as to how the war impacted interviewees' remembrances of and identification with Yugoslavia. Including a brief discussion of the current ramifications of Yugoslavia and its inheritances could have provided room for additional questions to be raised and global connections drawn.

Babović has given us an enthralling oral history of the former Yugoslav region which captured the memories and experiences of youth as socialism was collapsing. Acknowledging the geographical limitation of her connections, with the absence of Montenegrin representation among interviewees, Babović opens the door for further research in capturing socialist memory and the experiences of diasporic communities from across the former Yugoslav region. With the passing of time, transmutation of memory, and shifting political situation of the former Yugoslav region, Babović's work is invaluable to our understanding of socialism and its legacies. If the relevance of the Yugoslav past is still in question, interviewee Gordan Pejić provides the best rebuttal: “I am born as a Yugoslav, lived as a Yugoslav, will die a Yugoslav. That’s it” (152).

In This Issue