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Bard Undergraduate History Journal

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Hoffman Library, ca. 1895, 1895, black and white photograph, Bard in Black and White: Selections from the Bard College Archive, St. Stephens the Early Years, Bard Archives and Special Collections, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY.
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About the Journal:

The Bard Undergraduate History Journal is a student-run, peer-reviewed research publication that seeks to encourage undergraduate students to explore their academic interests. We are dedicated to upholding publishing and peer-review ethics. This publi/cation is additionally committed to the integrity of academic research. We are dedicated to publishing striking and impactful research across disciplines, as long as the work has a historical lens.

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This is the inaugural edition of the journal, so we are still in the process of developing a review strategy. Our main goal is to develop a double-blind peer review process, and we have a plan to impediment this system next semester. This semester we had a board of three, dedicated editors. We decided to delete the names from documents and be as blind in the review process as possible. Each of us looked at two to three papers and presented our observations to each other. In the next edition, we will extend the editing process to ensure that we have the ability to work with the submitters more to implement edits.

A Note on the Citation Format of the Papers:

Initially our goal was for each of these papers to be in Chicago format, as this is the citation style used within historical academia. However, as this was our first semester and many

of our papers came from different disciplines, some people did not submit their works in Chicago. We decided to include these essays anyway because of how strong they were. Despite them not being in Chicago, the citations within them are all correct in their respective citation styles. In the next edition, only work in correct Chicago citation style will be included.

A Note on the Format:

In this edition, we decided to include both interviews and essays together within the journal. We did this in order to break up the essays and create an engaging and interesting reading process.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to extend our gratitude to everyone who made the publication of this journal possible. A special thanks to Assistant Professor Valentina Grasso for inspiring us to start the journal and for providing important and meaningful guidance. We would also like to thank Professor Robert Culp for also providing important and meaningful guidance and spreading the word about the journal. Additional and special thanks to Melissa Germano for so generously helping us set the journal up on the Historical Studies website. Thank you to the entirety of the Bard College Historical Studies department for your support.

We are grateful for everyone who submitted to this year's publication, as well as all of the amazing people who we interviewed.

Meet the Editors:

Co-editor in chief: **Isabella Lipham ‘28 (she/her)**

Isabella is a second-year at Bard College from Atlanta, Georgia studying History with a minor in French Studies. Her historical area of interest is in the early modern period, with a focus on the Francophone world. She is particularly interested in the ‘history from below’ approach to explore larger themes of the crowd, the construction of the outsider, and religious conflict. In her free time she enjoys reading, thrifting, hiking, and annoyingly critiquing the costuming in every period drama ever created.

Co-editor in chief: **Francesca Oppenheimer ‘28 (she/her)**

Francesca is a second-year historical studies major at Bard College. She is originally from Charlottesville, Virginia. Her area of interest is mainly focused on the medieval period and her historical work employs historical methodology to discuss broader themes on society, politics, and religion. She is an avid latinist and will be studying German in the coming year. Outside of her work with the Undergraduate History Journal, Francesca can be found reading, watching tv and movies, and giving tours around campus for Bard Admissions.

Co-editor in chief: **Una Dee ‘28 (she/her)**

Una is a second-year student at Bard College from Canberra, Australia majoring in both History and Middle Eastern Studies. She is interested in transnational histories and cross cultural exchange between the Middle East and Southeast Asia, with a background of twelve years of Indonesian language study and two years of Arabic. She is particularly interested in gender and labor histories of the two regions. Una enjoys learning languages and watching 20th century films for ‘research.’

An Interview with Professor Valentina Grasso, Assistant Professor of History at Bard College, concerning Professor Grasso's academic journey, current works, and experience in academia.

Interviewer: Francesca Oppenheimer 0:25

All right, so my first question is mainly about your academic history and your dissertation. I was looking at your bio, and just the amount of different ways that you ended up getting to Cambridge and ended up doing your dissertation. I'm just really interested in how that came about? Like, how did you get into history in the first place?

Interviewee: Valentina Grasso 0:47

Okay, okay, history in the first place is actually a story of trauma. Well, I wanted to do classics after high school. I went to a high school that had the possibility to do Greek and Latin throughout the five years. So, you know, you graduate with a very advanced Greek and Latin knowledge. So I felt like it makes sense to do classics, but my parents didn't want me to do classics. They wanted me to do engineering.

So I did engineering for six months, and then I became chronically depressed, and I ran away and crazy stories. At the end, when I came back, the agreement was, I'm going to do languages, but modern languages, not like Greek and Latin, because my parents felt like you will never find a job. And so instead, that was 2011 they believed that Arabic was going to be popular as a choice in terms of languages. And so I did Arabic and Spanish. And while doing Arabic, I became interested in Philology, and I started doing Semitic Philology, which is connected, obviously, to Arabic. And from there, I moved to Aramaic and Arabic instead of Spanish. I mean, I kept doing Spanish, but it was a very, you know, minor, minor, minor, minor thing.

So Aramaic and Arabic, and then when I had to choose my master, I chose Biblical Hebrew and Arabic. And while I was doing my masters, I was given the opportunity to spend one year in London – masters in Italy are two years long. It's because BAs are three years and not four. So it's a bit complicated and different. But anyway, one of the two years I was at London, at SOAS, and I started working on the master dissertation, which was on pre-Islamic Arabia. Why pre Islamic Arabia? Mostly because I realized that there were many inscriptions that were either not studied or not translated or studied by maybe one person in the entire world. And I felt like, well, there is a gap, and I can try to fill this gap with all this knowledge about semitic languages that I've gained through the years. And so my master dissertation was on pre-Islamic Arabia and descriptions of pre-Islamic Arabia. And since I was in London, I felt like, well, maybe I should try to apply for PhDs in the UK, and sent a few applications. Eventually I chose Cambridge.

In Cambridge, my supervisor was not a specialist of pre-Islamic Arabia at all. He was a specialist of Late Antiquity, broadly speaking. And so I kind of combined the two, the fact that I wanted to work on pre Islamic Arabia, and I knew about descriptions and the archeology quite well, and obviously the fact that he was an expert of Late Antiquity, so it became like a dissertation on the Arabian Peninsula during Late Antiquity, not just descriptions.

I was actually doing the PhD when I realized that all the knowledge of Greek and Latin that I had, wasn't lost, you know, it was something that I could actually put to use. And throughout my BA and Masters, I also did a bit of archeology. So there was always a lot of field work involved. And so I guess the innovative aspect of the dissertation was really the combination of the use of archeological sources and literary resources.

Francesca 4:35

Did late antiquity fit well with pre Islamic Arabia? Because I always think of it more as a response to the Dark Ages, the end of the Roman Empire. So does it [pre-Islamic Arabia] fit well, or do you kind of consider it more of a category?

Professor Grasso 4:52

It's a great question, and it's a great question also because it's a serendipitous question, because I just got notified that I got the approval to edit a special issue on the Quran during Late Antiquity. And you already feel like the Quran during Late Antiquity? From a Chinese journal? So not even exactly like a Western, usually US or English/British Journal. No, I think it's still considered kind of a new thing to incorporate Arabia and the Quran within the discourse of Late Antiquity but also the Medieval world. And it's something that I really wanted to do with the book, which obviously is not here [in the office], because I think I gave it to another student. The goal of the book was really to show how Arabia is part of this new emerging global world, the global world of Late Antiquity. It's not cut out, Islam is not an alien product of Arabia, but it's in conversation with Judaism and Christianity, which actually achieved their maturation phase during the late antique period. But, I mean the Mishnah, the Talmud, the Gospels, they're all actually popularized and composed, well, not really composed, but finalized during Late Antiquity, during the first millennium. Yeah, no, I think it does make sense, but it's still very rare to go to conferences on Late Antiquity or the Medieval world and find people working on Arabia, you usually find people working on the Mediterranean world.

Francesca 6:37

Do you have any key methodological approaches to teaching? You kind of mentioned the kind of more all encompassing view, and so when you come into the classroom, or not even just

the classroom, like your scholarly work in general, are there any kind of driving ways that you approach history? Maybe, like through linguistics, like through language, or...?

Professor Grasso 7:01

For me, it's always been a combination of archeology and literary resources. I think that the most crucial way to get to a truth and historical reality is to actually compare the sources that we have and compare different kinds of sources. I think archeology should always have the preference, should have always been the main type of source that we use, mostly because it's usually less biased. Obviously, when you're in front of royal inscriptions, you do have biases as well, but when you're in front of pottery, for example, you usually don't have as many biases as when you're in front of Procopius. Another student and I were just talking about Procopius, and the fact that Procopius is super biased and is telling a story that obviously is very much subjected to what the Emperor wants, including the *Secret History*.

So I think for me, it's a comparison of the sources. And what I try to bring into the classroom is appreciation about the diverse types of sources that we have, and how we can compare and contrast different kinds of sources. So for example, one of my SPROJ students is working on Armenia, and he's mostly working with literary sources written in Armenia, which tell completely different stories than sources written in the Roman Empire. But at the same time, I keep pushing him to look at archeological material, because the archeological material can be dated quite precisely nowadays, and can complete the picture that comes from the literary resources.

Francesca 8:50

Yeah, I guess the only main bias in archeological work is just the environment, like, we have a bias of Egyptian archeological material, because it's so dry there and so, yeah, it definitely does kind of cut through the important, propagandistic sources.

Professor Grasso 9:13

Yes, and with Egypt, the weather, we are so lucky at the same time, because the dry climate is allowing us to see quite well what was going on with ordinary people, because the receipts – the papyruses

Francesca 9:31

The Cairo Geniza?

Professor Grasso 9:32

Exactly, I mean parchment survives only in dry climates, and parchment is usually the preferential source for receipts, legal documents, and everyday documents.

Francesca 9:47

Have there been any shifts in your area of interest? Are you currently or do you foresee that you'll be turning your focus in the future?

Professor Grasso 10:01

Well, yes, it's actually not a super happy story. I feel like there are still lots of biases about women doing Quranic studies, the study of the Arabian Peninsula. It's impossible for women to excavate in many places in the Arabian Peninsula, for example, in Saudi Arabia. And obviously, if you cannot excavate in Saudi Arabia easily, it becomes very complicated to have a full picture of what you want to say. And so it's a problematic field, to put it in a very simple way, and it's a field also dominated by Muslim scholars still today. And it's not always easy to talk about religion in front of religious people, and so I think it's a challenge. And I'm currently working on

both the Arabian Peninsula and other fields, and I think the other fields, other geographies, other places, other times, it's literally, to give me a break. It's more relaxing. For example, I recently worked on Japan in the medieval period, and it was mostly because I felt like I wanted to work for a little bit on something that is not so aggressively debated upon. You have no idea how many death threats I received. It's at that level of craziness. And so reading like online, Reddit, Twitter, things like, “Oh, she's a female scholar, and she's not even… whatever” Anyway, I don't want to go into much detail, but it's a complicated field, and I think it's nice from time to time, to actually work on something where there are less complications.

And so yeah, this Japan piece and I worked on Central Asia, the Turks recently, and I have chased, and I'm actually chasing right now, the editor of a journal – I sent him a piece like three years ago, and the piece was on medieval Ethiopia, but Ethiopia the 16th century, and as seen by a friar from Venice. So very distant from pre Islamic Arabia in Ethiopia, it's close by, but the time is completely different. So yes, I would say that I like to think of myself as a scholar of the medieval period without any geographical constraint, even though, obviously I do have an expertise in the Red Sea.

Francesca 13:12

It's really awesome that you could just kind of take a break and shift to something else. I always think of academia as one where you look back on, maybe you're retiring, you look back and it's like this flowed into this, and this informed this next thing. So, I love to hear that your work has had such variety.

Professor Grasso 13:32

But the beautiful part of peer review is the fact that when you send a paper to a journal, they don't know that you are an expert of this and not of that? So, if the research, the data is actually good.

Francesca 13:47

Yeah, it's the same sources, and even if you don't have that specific expertise, that's really great. Are you working on any book or anything currently?

Professor Grasso 13:57

I'm working on my second monograph on the Red Sea right now, and I plan to do so also during my sabbatical in the spring of next year. And I'm working on this special issue that was just approved, so eventually I would have to start working on that, and I'm in the process of finishing, I think, an edited volume on Indian Ocean statuettes. They were discovered in archeological contexts outside of the Indian peninsula. So, mostly this, I'm trying to stop myself from starting like new papers and stuff, because I have to focus on the monograph – unfortunately, because I would like to simultaneously do many things, but I know I have to work on the monograph and I actually have several conferences set throughout the summer that are connected to the monograph. So I'm stuck with that, whether I like it or not.

Francesca 14:59

Well, my final question would be, how does working on senior projects, being a senior project advisor and teaching in class and reading student essays affect your academic work?

Professor Grasso 15:13

It is the best part of my job. My supervisor hated teaching, supervising students, just didn't like doing it. It’s totally fine to be, I think, one of those professors that wants to be in an ivory tower just researching like a monk all day and all night. But at the end of the day, I think it

depends on your personality. I mean, I'm a very extroverted person, and love interacting with people and hearing from students. I think it's the best part of my job. It's literally the most motivating part, I would say, of my life – but my son, you know, I have a toddler, so I cannot really say that – but it's really what brings me joy, to see a project develop in connection with my mind, but not guided entirely. You know, it's, I don't really know how to put it. For example, with Ethan's project, and my other advisee, Bob. I love to see every single week how much they add, how much their ideas have changed, and how much I can also add to them.

Francesca 16:32

It's probably really amazing, after having been, like, writing your own dissertation and doing your own writing, and being in that position that now being, somewhat, on the other side.

Professor Grasso 16:42

I had the best PhD supervisor ever. My husband makes fun of me because he believes that I see him as a father. He's literally my father, I do really see it that way, so it's fine. But I wasn't this lucky before, you know, during my BA in particular I was just assigned a project, and I had to work on it. So first of all, I don't want that to happen to my students, I want to be present as much as possible. And I want to give them the same experience I had doing my PhD. So I want them to feel that I'm invested into the project as much as they are, maybe even more so.

Francesca 17:30

Yeah, because you don't have to worry about the like, agonizing, sitting down and writing you just get to, like, see the overarching theme and be like “This is great!”

Professor Grasso 17:39

Well sometimes I must say that when I see them stressed or sad or whatever, I become even more so, because I feel like maybe it's my fault I didn't guide them right, or I should have

done something, I should have said something, and so on. So I feel also helpless, because I can't really just sit and write their own project. So it's a kind of complicated situation at times. But yeah, last year, the first SPROJ I advised here at Bard, won the SPROJ prize. And so obviously that was a big moment for me, because it was not just a project we had worked on for one year. We spent basically two years working on this project, because he took classes with me, and then started remaining around to work on this project. And his project is still, in my opinion, the most comprehensive study of the Kazars, ever written.

Francesca 18:41

Wow!

Professor Grasso 18:43

It's amazing, really amazing. And so, yeah, when things like this happen, it's obviously wonderful to be a teacher.

From Nation Time to Cosmic Time: Afrofuturism and the Application of the 'Black Aesthetic'

Imani Okech

I. Introduction

From Negro Spirituals like *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,* to Nina Simone's *Mississippi Goddamn*, the Black community has always utilized art and song to imagine a liberated and autonomous future. Across the various artistic mediums, Black artists have used creative practices to gesture towards worlds in which Black life can flourish beyond the constraints of the present. This impulse to imagine a 'future', more particularly shaped by sovereignty and self-determination, threads together a similarity between various movements which are usually seen as distinct. This imagination of a future goes beyond a simple acceptance and welcoming into a white society, but instead makes room for a world that is created for and by the Black community.

The Black Arts Movement was founded for just that; artistic expression that is unapologetic, demanding and political. The Black Aesthetic that comes from this movement is a philosophy that is the foundation to some of our most beloved Black artists today, even if they don't know it; from John Coltrane to Solange. This aesthetic practice leaves room for artists of the future, creating an archival memory of what it means to, not only, make political art, but also, what it means to create art as a liberated person–not through commercialization and capital, but through the spirit and community that has been passed down through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The Black Aesthetic proves to reflect and support the Black Revolution, as Maulana Karenga continues, "Any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid" (Bracey Jr. et al. 2014, 51). This forceful and, as some would say, radical position of the Black Aesthetic and Black Art encourages young artists to look through a different lens that is beyond whiteness and submission.

Afrofuturism was coined by white author Mark Dery in 1994. Afrofuturism is a movement and philosophy spearheaded by writers and musicians alike; Yes, there are theories of

Black Americans being descendants of alien abductees which, I hope, is a play on the kidnapping of Africans for forced labor.[1] But within the art world, Afrofuturism is a transformation of already well thought-out traditions in the Black community. As author Kodwo Eshun describes perfectly in a way I fail to, "The field of Afrofuturism does not seek to deny the tradition of countermemory. Rather, it aims to extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective" (Eshun 2003, 289). In other words, Afrofuturism builds on Black traditions of memory and resisting historical erasure, but it pushes those same traditions forward by insisting that Black people must also imagine and claim a new future.

How did the Black Arts Movement and their ideas of Black self-definition, artistic autonomy, and cultural-spiritual liberation lay the conceptual groundwork for Afrofuturist musicians in the later 20th century and beyond? Through this question, I aim to trace a philosophical lineage through the "Black Aesthetic" to propose that Afrofuturism does not emerge in opposition to this 'ideology', but rather is evolved from it. Afrofuturist music inherits and transforms the radical philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. Musicians use sound, performance, and world-building to push that reclamation into its expanded temporal frame.

Where the Black Arts Movement sought to reclaim black identity through politics and nationalist, community-oriented, philosophies through the Black Aesthetic, Afrofuturist musicians extended that vision into a future, imagining a liberated Black world beyond the constraints of race, nation and time itself.

II. Historical and Social Context: The Black Arts Movement

[1] [1] "This is especially perplexing in the light of the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which is unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on Black bodies" (Mark Dery 1994, 180)

The Black Arts Movement emerged out of a moment of profound political transformation and social unrest. In the late 1950s, the United States hit a major shift within the political and social landscape; Cold War tensions, the decline of McCarthyism, Brown v. Board of Education and, of course, the Montgomery Bus Boycott. These moments signaled the possibility of structural change, and for many Black Americans, they represented an opening toward social and political 'inclusion'. The passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 marked significant legal victory, however these gains were met with continued loss through violence and resistance. The assassinations of Malcom X in 1965 and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 underscored the fragility of progress and exposed the limits of nonviolent reform within a deeply racialized state.

At the same time, international liberation struggles played a crucial role in shaping Black political consciousness in the United States. Anti-colonial revolutions such as the Cuban Revolution (1959) and the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (1952) offered models of resistance that challenged Western imperialism. These movements inspired communities to imagine a future outside of their seemingly limited lived realities. For many, these global struggles demonstrated that radical transformation was not only possible, but necessary. Movements such as the Black Power Movement, the Black Panther Movement and the Black Student Movement all gained momentum at this time, emphasizing self-defense and political autonomy. It is from this ideological shift, from Civil Rights to Black Power, that the Black Arts Movement took form.

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) was a Black nationalist movement focused primarily on the self-determination of Black people through the arts; music, literature, theater, and visual arts became central tools through which Black artists and intellectuals sought to redefine Black identity in their own terms. The movement started in 1965 in Harlem, New York, when poet and intellectual Amiri Baraka (who then was known as Leroi Jones), founded the Black Arts

Repertory Theater/School (BARTS). The movement was provoked primarily through the assasination of activist Malcom X, whose political philosophy deeply influenced Baraka and other BAM figures; his radical ideologies "put words to the volcanic torrent of anger and frustration" Baraka and others had on the Civil Rights Movement (Baraka 2000, 12). Baraka explains further:

> "The "turn the other cheek," "non-violent" approach to the struggle for democracy we rejected. We did not understand why we must continue to let crazed ignorant hooligans attack us to show we were noble or that we deserved to be citizens. The endless television horror shows of Black people being water hosed, beaten, dogged by two and four legged dogs, lynched, jailed, got our jaws tight not only at the sum who did this but the negroes who accepted it" (Baraka 2000, 12).

For BAM artists, art could no longer be detached from the lived realities of state violence and surveillance, but instead, artistic production has to function as a site of resistance and mobilization. This may also be known as a sort of "anti-art for art's sake" ideology: Karenga explains, "It (art) must be functional, that is *useful*, as we cannot accept the false doctrine of "art for art's sake". For in fact, there is no such thing…all art reflects the value system of which it comes" (Bracey Jr et al. 2014, 51-52). The BAM emphasized the importance of independent Black cultural institutions. Community theaters, art troupes and journals were not simply artistic spaces but political ones–places where Black artists could produce work free from white institutional control and speak directly to Black audiences. Institution-building thus became a form of cultural self-defense and a practical extension of the Black nationalist ideology. What makes the Black Arts Movement particularly interesting is that they are not asking for inclusion within the existing (white and western) artistic standards, but are instead asking for an entirely new artistic standard grounded in the Black experience. Equally important along with that principle was spiritual and cultural renewal; in a way, an encouragement of connecting with the roots of indigenous African spirituality and art practices. Many BAM artists believed that slavery and racism had caused deep psychological and spiritual damage, and that art could play

a role in restoring a collective sense of wholeness and consciousness.

Larry Neal articulated these commitments most clearly through the formulation of a "Black aesthetic". Neal argued that the BAM sought a radical reordering of Western cultural values, more specifically, Neal describes, "The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics" (Larry Neal 1968, 1). Most artists, writers and musicians aligned with the movement understood culture not as a secondary reflection of politics, but as a primary site of struggle; one in which new forms of a united Black consciousness could be produced and sustained. Although the BAM is frequently understood as temporally bound to the crises of the 1960s, its artistic and theoretical texts contain a latent futurity. Embedded in its calls for cultural revolution and a new consciousness are visions of transformed black beings; visions that gesture toward worlds not yet realized.

III. Defining the 'Black Aesthetic'

In order to apply Afrofuturism to the Black aesthetic, we must define our terms. Black Art, as described by Karenga, should always "expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution" (Bracey Jr. et al. 2014, 52). This artistic tradition was essentially a rejection of the principles of groups like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the two American political parties; Young Black writers from the ghetto turned their backs on the "certainties" of both, and went in search of "New and more effective means and methods of seizing power" (Hoyt W. Fuller 1968, 3). Thus started the journey toward the Black Aesthetic. Fuller defines the Black Aesthetic as "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of Black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of Black experiences" (Hoyt W. Fuller 1968, 9). While this

definition is not super specific, the Organization of Black American Culture narrows it down: "In the writers' workshop sponsored by the group, *the writers are deliberately striving to invest their work with the distinctive styles and rhythms and colors of the ghetto, with those peculiar qualities which, for example, characterize the music of a John Coltrane or a Charlie Parker or a Ray Charles*" (Hoyt W. Fuller 1968, 10). In other words, they established a specific criteria to measure their work on how much said works adequately reflect the Black experience. Larry Neal goes on to describe,

> "The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: Whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors'? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors?" (Larry Neal 1968, 2).

Considered together, these definitions frame the Black aesthetic as an ethical and political demand placed on Black art that insists cultural sovereignty and the reorientation of Black consciousness away from white assumptions of art.

I believe we can tighten the definition by thinking about music in particular. Yes, the definition before referenced applies in general to a sonic medium, but I think musicology adds a certain nuance that is not present within literature and visual arts; for example, author Jimmy Stewart asserts "The assumption is, of course, that the music of Black people in this country, aside from certain un avoidable ethnic considerations, can be defined in the same terms and by the same requirements as those that define the music produced by them (whites)" (Jimmy Stewart 1971, 81). This critique reveals the fundamental issue of assumption. To assume music can be evaluated apart from its social function is, at this point, damaging and problematic. The demands of the Black Aesthetic

in music is less concerned with formal musical analysis (music theory) than it is with function and intention. Applying this to the BAM framework, music is not an autonomous object; it is practice that takes from the past, historical memory and traditions, and pushes them forward. The reason Black music is so unique is because behind the rhythm, the voice, and overall skill, there is a reason, a history, and a longing that, arguably, western musicology cannot define. Sound, in this sense, becomes a direct tool of self-definition instead of simply a form.

IV. Afrofuturism as Concept

This music is all a part of another tomorrow,
Another kind of language.
(Space Is The Place Dir. John Coney, 1974)

Afrofuturism is a body of Black speculative thought which sought to recover "the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken" (Kodwo Eshun 2003, 301). In much simpler terms, given Eshun's dense-ness, Afrofuturism emerges from an innate rejection of imagination; a historical moment that denies Black people access to the future. Afrofuturist artists like Sun Ra and Janelle Monet produce "counter-futures" that resist this denial while simultaneously producing conceptual tools through which Black artists can challenge and reshape their current political and social systems. In Afrofuturist music, sound becomes a tool that can imagine Black people and their liberation beyond the limitations of the present.

Afrofuturism, in a way, is fundamentally a way of self-discovery; yes, in terms of my argument, a collective self-discovery. There are many ways to define Afrofuturism, but all collectively reflect a sense of world-building in the name of freedom for Black people. It is also

a collective transformation. What many contemporary scholars critique in the leadership of the Black Panther Party and other similar militant Black freedom groups, and as we see in film adaptations like *The Spook Who Sat by The Door* (1973), the future would be brought to you from the Black man. Afrofuturism transforms the binary identification of the Black body in the Western society, and opens the community to a world beyond binary's, beyond definition, and beyond time. There are many writings on the principles of Afrofuturism, but a blog on Medium caught my attention in that they described as the "laws" of Afrofuturism:

> I. All time and space occur simultaneously.
> II. Afrofuturism does not distinguish among works which are based in experience and reality, works which are based in the imagination, or works which are speculative. III. Afrofuturism is a Human movement.
> IV. Free your mind...and your ass will follow
>
> (Rick Griffith 2018, 3-4)

Here, we're not treating Afrofuturism as a genre or style, but more specifically as a sonic and philosophical practice that first, reclaims Black access to the future, two, uses sound as a technology of transformation, and finally, imagines collective liberation beyond gendered, nationalist binaries. While the BAM articulated a present-tense demand for cultural sovereignty and political self-definition, Afrofuturism extends these commitments by relocating them within speculative temporalities. The principles of a "Black Aesthetic" within art makes room for these considerations of the future, and rather than abandoning the Black Aesthetic, Afrofuturism remakes it.

V. Afrofuturism in Music in Conversation with the BAM

Music is a very particular way to remorph the principles of Afrofuturism, and in contemporary years, it is more often a term which is *applied* to artists rather than something that is self-proclaimed. A lot of spiritual Jazz artists like Alice Coltrane and Larraji have been pitched to me as examples of this, as well as contemporary musicians like FKA Twigs and

Solange; There are many reasons why I reject these artists as examples of Afrofuturism, and the main reason is more or less the basis in which these artists make music. One major distinction the definition of Afrofuturism makes is that Afrofuturism is "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture" (Mark Dery 1994, 180). The artists listed don't necessarily adhere to this definition nor the before-mentioned definition by Kodwo Eshun.

Afrofuturism in music finds its most fully articulated in the work of Jazz pioneer, Sun Ra, as the above all for his philosophies of the world were both unorthodox and futuristic; his art looked to both the past and future to "reimagine and claim new metaphorical and material spaces for the diaspora" (Daniel Kreiss 2012, 197). Born in Birmingham, Alabama as Herman Poole Blount, he later on changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra, and believed that he was simply a vessel for his spirit which was actually from Saturn. It is said that he never actually pushed the idea that he was *from* saturn, but more so that he used his "alien-ness" as a metaphor for being different, and alone. His invocation of alien identity should not be read literally, but symbolically; as a response to the condition of Black alienation but perhaps also gender fluidity. He explains in a late interview, "I left my family, I left my friends. I left them for real. I left everything to be me, 'cause I knew I was not like them. Not like black or white, not like Americans. I'm not like nobody else. I'm alone on this planet" (Päivi Väätänen in The Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy). While he maybe didn't necessarily think of himself as an actual alien, he did believe that he went to space and was abducted by aliens in 1936, which was a heavy influence on his career going forward. These beliefs were neither abstract or rhetorical; they structured the very way Sun Ra engaged with music as an artistic medium.

His lifelong goal was to re-imagine the relationship between music, technology and the African-American identity, and he does just that through his DIY instrumentation and band, The

Arkestra, as well as his extraordinary costumes inspired by ancient Egypt and space itself. In this sense, the Arkestra functioned much like the BAM's cultural institutions like BARTS: A self-contained world in which Black autonomy and imagination could be rehearsed outside white aesthetic and political control. According to Graphic Designer John Corbett, Sun Ra believed music to be a tool to fix the issues with the world, he explains:

> "As far as Sun Ra was concerned, the past was passed. "Yesterday belongs to the dead/Tomorrow belongs to the living." The past was violence and "the chains that bind." But imagination could usher in a better tomorrow, one full of pleasure and freedom and discipline. Freedom and discipline were not contradictory. As far as Ra and his peers were concerned, these ideas went hand-in-hand. And music was the method, the primary means for unleashing these positive vibrations in order to build a more promising world" (John Corbett on Design Observer 2007).

Here, imagination becomes the political force, and the music itself operates as a medium through which futurity can be practiced in the present. These ideas are not only expressed through Sun Ra's music, but also in his cinematic work. He says,

The music here is different
The vibrations are different, not like Planet Earth.
The planet is the sound of guns, anger, frustration.
There was no one to talk to on Planet Earth who would understand.
We set up a colony of Black people here.
See what they can do on a planet of their own without any white people there.
They could drink in the beauty of this planet.
It would affect their vibrations, for the better of course.
(Space Is The Place Dir. John Coney, 1974)

Sun Ra's compositions resist linear musical progression, using improvisation that mirrors Afrofuturism's rejection of Western temporality; in doing so, his music enacts Eshun's previously cited notion of counter-futures by sonically collapsing time; the past, present and future into a single space.[2]

Sun Ra had an exceptional influence on many artists of the BAM, including Amiri Baraka, who raved about Sun Ra for most of his career, enough to have him participate and

[2] see song *Angels and Demons at Play,* c. 1964 by Sun Ra Arkestra. The song at first can be disorienting, maybe even confusing with the switches of rhythm and lineality.

perform at BARTS' first program in Harlem. In his review in the *African American Review* Journal, Baraka raves about Ra, calling him a Sphinx (Guessing to be a play on Ra's take on Egyptology) and almost applies the Black Aesthetic and principles of the BAM to Ra's music, saying: "That was a fundamental expression of Ra's music: a communal consciousness, describing the life before Babel and its mindless tower, as well as prophesying its coming" (Baraka 1995, 254). I kind of read this as Baraka informally including Ra into the BAM–obviously we know he was involved which is why Baraka and him crossed paths, but Baraka also understood what Ra was doing was self-defining in its most genuine form.

Sun Ra's work allows us to clarify what Afrofuturist music demands. It is not an aesthetic of abstraction, which I believe is a way to describe it. Rather, Sun Ra helps us define it as a world-building tool which means to imagine futurity through political intervention. As Afrofuturism moves into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it enters the realm of popular music, digital media and commercialization, which was different from the avant-garde jazz scene it first appeared in. This by itself raises new questions about visibility and liberation under a much bigger beast, neo-capitalism.

Janelle Monáe represents a contemporary 'evolution' of Afrofuturist music, translating from Sun Ra's speculative practices into a world-building sphere focused in multi-media. Monáe is similar to Sun Ra in the sense that she constructed an alter ego, Cindi Mayweather.[3] Mayweather was "Android No. 57821," and "an Alpha Platinum 9000" whose "programming includes a rock-star proficiency package and a working soul". English and Kim explain further, "because of her forbidden love affair with a human, Mayweather is being hotly pursued by the evil leaders of the last remaining city on Earth; she had already been an outlaw because of her leadership of a rebel android movement and her creation of "a rebellious new form of pop music

[3] See song March of the Wolfmasters, c. 2008 by Janelle Monáe.

known as cybersoul" (English et. al. 2013, 219). Monáe's figure of the android functions as more than a narrative; it functions as a political metaphor for racialized and gendered labor. Like Sun Ra's alien persona, Mayweather's artificial status marks her as outside the boundaries of humanity. For example, in Monáe's short film for the song, "Many Moons" (2009),[4] where Mayweather is the entertainment for a sort of android-auction, she showcases the fetishization of technology. Watching the film, you see that Monáe takes a slightly different, but contemporary approach to the future in that, even in the year 2719, we do not live in a post gender/post race society. If anything, she almost teases a sort of dystopian future which I read as a warning. English and Kim explain,

> "Cindi Mayweather…similarly combines the notion of freedom achieved through the technological with the notion of robot as the ultimate, malleable "other," perpetually subject to domination and to fetishization within commodity culture and to reinsertion into familiar social categories and identities, from gentlewoman/equestrian to bride, as in the "Many Moons" video" (English et al. 2013, 223).

Monáe's mythology on the android and future technology complicates the assumption that technological progress produces social and political liberation. Rather than imagining a future free of race and gender, they instead insist that systems of domination persist, often in more insidious forms (compare this argument with the current problem with AI being used by the U.S Government, for example…). In a way, her afrofuturism poses as more of a critique on technoculture itself, and exposes how racialized and gendered bodies continue to be commodified and surveilled. Where Sun Ra imagines liberation through departure, such as escaping Earth, time and Western history, Monáe stages Afrofuturism from within the structures of late capitalism and control over technology. This shift marks a crucial evolution in Afrofuturist thought. In this way, Monáe's work fulfills Mark Dery's definition of Afrofuturism as fiction that is engaged with African-American concerns in technoculture, while also enacting

[4] Janelle Monae: "Many Moons" Official Short Film

Eshun's notion of counter-futures but in a specifically different way of Sun Ra.

Much like BAM artists, Monáe insists that art serve a political purpose; however, rather than grounding this project in nationalist or community-centered institutions, as Sun Ra did, Monáe locates liberation in a world-building practice that centers Black, queer and feminine bodies that are historically marginalized within both contemporary mainstream culture and Black political movements themselves.

VI. Conceptual Bridges Between BAM and Afrofuturist Music

Neal and Fuller's definitions of a Black aesthetic articulate the need for Black art to reflect the needs for revolution and the experiences of Black people. Afrofuturist music extends this logic by shifting the terrain on which Black self-definition exists, and operates. Where Neal and Karenga emphasize cultural sovereignty within their present political moment, Afrofuturism relocates that struggle to the future. Together, Sun Ra and Janelle Monáe, while their methods differ, both carry forward the Black aesthetic's core values while also deploying sound, technology and speculative identities, like alter egos, to challenge the limits placed on Black futurity.

Afrofuturist music, as we can see by comparing both artists, is not a fixed genre, or even an ideology; what they both showcase is that Afrofuturism continues the radical impulses of a Black aesthetic by reimagining liberation. Like the Black aesthetic, Sun Ra rejects western values altogether and constructs a new autonomous system grounded in Black cosmology, much like indigenous African religions. Similarly, Monáe fulfills Karenga's instruction that Black art be functional in its nature. Through the figure of the android, Monáe uses a narrative and sound to interrogate how race, gender and labor persist into the future within the lens of late-stage capitalism; this in result expands the Black aesthetic to include identities which may have otherwise been ignored in the 1960s, like queer folks and women.

The major distinction between the Black aesthetic and Afrofuturism lies in their temporal orientation, meaning how they emphasize the past, present and future. The Black aesthetic demands a response to immediate conditions of oppression, whereas Afrofuturism asks what liberation looks like when imagined across time and space. Afrofuturism thus does not reject the Black aesthetic, but I think they expand it and create something new with it, extending its ethical demand for Black self-definition; it radicalizes the Black aesthetic by insisting that Black freedom must be sustainable in the future as well as the present.

VII. Conclusion

Afrofuturist music does not emerge in opposition to the Black Arts Movement or the Black aesthetic, but rather evolves from it by extending its revolutionary demands across time.

Larry Neal and Maulana Karenga insisted that Black art be functional and politically engaged, grounded in Black self-definition. Afrofuturist musicians take this, but shift it slightly to the lens of the future and time. Where the Black aesthetic demanded cultural sovereignty in response to immediate conditions of racial violence, Afrofuturism asks what Black liberation must look like if it were to endure past the present moment.

It is important to look at these movements as a part of each other instead of being separate causes. Yes, I believe that Afrofuturism in the end is a distinct movement that is very broad in its nature; it is not necessarily a political or social movement, but we can see solely from looking at Sun Ra and Janelle Monáe that it has the capacity to be just that. Imagining freedom in the future itself, especially for Black people, is a political act. All Afrofuturism does is continue the work begun through the Black aesthetic, and for Sun Ra, was a part of it in more ways than none.

There are many reasons to enjoy these artistic movements separately, but together they reinvent what it means to be free, and to imagine that freedom for yourself beyond the

constraints of the present. They create a collective understanding of what it means to want something for a community, and make art surrounded by that same desire.

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Interview with Steve From Student Labor Dialogue

Steve is currently a member of SEIU (Service Employees International Union) Local 200's Executive Board which represents about 12000 union members in upstate NY and Vermont and a union shop steward here at Bard, but mostly serves as an advisor in that role. He was previously Buildings and Grounds (B&G) chair for about 10 years and has been an officer for 22 years at Bard. This Q&A is on the history of the Bard Student Labor Dialogue Club (SLD).

What was your role in the early stages of the SLD?

Steve: I started attending the SLD during the 2003-4 academic year. At that time I believe the SLD was an official organization for a year. At the same time there was a second labor organization named FLOC (Fair Labor Organizing Committee) that focused on the fair labor practices of campus vendors. The two organizations were largely comprised of the same members and the year after merged into the SLD.

It is my understanding that the SLD club was the formalized offshoot of an informal student organization which organized in support of the B&G contract in 2003.

That contract had been resolved by the time I started working at Bard. The three original co-leaders were Sari (Billik), Noah (Weston) and Josh (Kuhbler). (I'm not 100% on Josh's last name)

I first became a union shop steward in 2003. I started working at Bard in 2002. Bard was the first union job I worked. So when I arrived at the first SLD meeting, I was both trying to understand the power dynamics of Bard and what my role would be in the union. Since I was able to attend the meetings (difficult for working people especially with families because of the

hour) and because I felt comfortable talking to students (I was previously a teaching assistant when I was in grad school) which can be a challenge for workers because of perceived class and cultural differences, I basically became the liaison between the union and the SLD. A role I held until I stepped down as union chair in 2020.

B & G Works for Less

by Gus Feldman

As students habitually envelop their consciousness in the microcosm of Bard lifestyle, little thought is devoted to the people who persistently sweat in order to sustain Bard as a functioning community. Without the manual labor of the skilled carpenters, electricians, plumbers, landscapers, and horticulturists, who comprise the Buildings & Grounds (B&G) staff, we as students simply could not spend the bulk of our time submerged in books, preparing for occupations free of manual labor. In the heat of finals, when one has several papers due and hundreds of pages to read, it is very easy to forget the value of an operative toilet, let alone the person who keeps it that way.

Because B&G workers are so vital to the Bard community, it is tragic to hear complaints that some workers are struggling to make ends meet. Over the past month several employees from B&G, and their union representatives, have been meeting with students to express their dissatisfaction with the Bard administration. Unlike the employees for ServiceMaster/ Aramark and Chartwells, who are employed by these corporations who Bard simply holds a contract with, B&G workers are employed directly by the college. Right now their biggest complaint concerns the unhealthy state of the wages and benefits they are receiving from the college.

According to statistics provided by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) local 200, the union which represents both B&G and ServiceMaster/ Aramark employees at Bard, a B&G employee who wants to receive family healthcare through the college must pay close to 20% their weekly take-home pay. This means a B&G worker who buys this health plan must work five days a week and only get paid for four. This fact looks increasingly grim when juxtaposed to the health plan Buildings & Grounds workers receive at Vassar and Marist. At both these schools, family health care is completely covered by the college, and hence costs the worker nothing.

Bard also falls behind Vassar and Marist in supplying B&G workers with adequate pay. Salary for B&G workers at all three schools is divided between two different groups of workers. There are the "skilled trades" workers, such as electricians and plumbers, who receive a higher wage and there are the "grounds" workers who receive less. The table below shows the disparity of wages between Bard and Marist and Vassar.

A newspaper expert from the Bard Free Press, Vol. 4, No. 7 (April 29, 2003).

How did the club look compared to later years?

Steve: As there was no contract negotiation in 2003 to be the club's focus, the SLD was an organization trying to define its purpose when I first started attending. Simply stated and as the name suggests, the original purpose of the SLD was to develop an ongoing dialog between students and workers with the intent of students achieving a first person understanding of the on campus labor issues from workers' perspectives. I think out of these early dialogs, an ethos evolved which I paraphrase as follows - *Because the Bard administration is opaque, neither students nor workers can truly understand the intent of the administration, as such, the SLD chooses to support workers in their labor issues with the intent of achieving a fair and just workplace for all workers at Bard College.* As worker representative, I committed to always provide straightforward information without hyperbole to help in the SLD's decision-making. During this early period the means of achieving these objectives solidified, I paraphrase - *The SLD will achieve a fair and just workplace at Bard by exercising the unique power of students, including their ability to organize fellow students to labor issues, and the ability to directly confront the administration on their labor practices through direct action.*
While I believe this will always be at the core of the SLD, the organization did take different focuses over the years based on the interests of the leadership (with a couple of exceptions group or shared leadership) and labor challenges of the moment (mostly the absence of contract fights). This includes:

- Helping Vassar students form their original SLD
- Standing on other, local union picket lines
- Labor oriented art projects

- Labor oriented education panels on subjects such as what is a labor union, what is a union contract and how do I start a union (all very well attended)
- Labor speakers series
- Labor movie series

Because the union is in partnership with the SLD, we have attempted to include students in our processes, such as our meetings, so that they may achieve a first person practical understanding of how our union works. We have also helped students get labor internships and labor jobs.

What is a significant event(s) in SLD history to me?

Steve: The most significant event in SLD was the Aramark insourcing campaign (2010-12). This was a multi-year campaign that culminated in the first successful insourcing campaign on a college campus in New York State. This resulted in previous Bard employees (ES workers) who had been outsourced to a sub-contractor (first ServiceMaster and then they were bought out by Aramark) being re-hired as direct employees of the college. This campaign was led by Zeke Perkins who was one of the rare single leaders of the SLD. Zeke was later hired by Local 200 as an organizer and has led numerous successful organizing campaigns on college campuses across New York.

Two other campaigns are particularly important to B&G workers and their healthcare out of pocket cost:

In 2003 the college proposed to more than double our monthly insurance copays. The SLD organized a series of three on campus marches which resulted in the college not only maintaining our $150 monthly family plan cost but *extending it to the entire campus.*

2015 Rallies for Affordable Healthcare: The college was once again pressuring B&G for greatly increased employee contribution. These two rallies in Red Hook convinced the college to

agree to shift to SEIU's benefit fund insurance. This is the exact same Blue Cross/Blue Shield PPO plan that the college offered but available at such a significant savings that we still maintain a monthly family contribution of $150.

How is the SLD connected to the larger activist history of Bard?

Steve: Not sure I am the best person to answer this because as a worker on a workers schedule and not networked into broader campus communications we are often not aware of other campus activism except as it has been reported in various Bard newspapers. I can say that there have been periods of enhanced activism on campus (Gaza, Iraq wars) and during these periods there tended to be greater student interest in the SLD and labor issues.

Why is SLD important today?

Steve:

1. Because building community and breaking down cultural and socio-economic barriers is always important.
2. Because there is always a need to educate about labor unions and rights.
3. Because it is always necessary for experienced activists to transfer their activism skills and abilities to the next generation.
4. Because the need for workplace justice, even at an "enlightened" liberal arts institution, never goes away.
5. Because the current federal government attacks on unions and workplace rights is unprecedented.

Making the Ottoman Nation-State

Declan Carney

Introduction

Although it was not a nation-state, the Ottoman empire over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries underwent a process of transformation that brought it closer to that model. The Ottomans had witnessed the development of the nation-state in Europe and how this had allowed European empires to expand across the globe. They responded to this new paradigm by attempting to synthesize their existing state structure with features of European states, in order to achieve parity with the West.

Previous Ottoman political order was grounded in the principle of traditional empire and influenced by Turco-Mongol, Persianate, and Islamic practices. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottomans attempted to refashion their empire into a modern centralized state during a period of reform initiated by the Tanzimat decree and influenced by pragmatism as well as Western liberalism. Three different conceptions of Ottoman "nationhood" arose: Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism. Each of these ideologies proposed a basis for the subjects of the Ottoman sultan to reevaluate themselves as being members of a shared political community. Although Ottoman administrators and thinkers made serious attempts to establish a shared national identity, the political realities of the empire left this project at best unfinished by the time of the First World War. The failure to create a nation-state out of the Ottoman empire put them in a vulnerable position. Unlike Japan, whose unity endowed it with strength and won it the respect of the West, Turkey remained weak and without a shared sense of national community that the state could call upon to defend itself. Unable to constitute itself as a non-Western great power, it thus suffered from defeat and partition in the twentieth century.

Traditional Ottoman Political Order

The Ottoman state was an imperial state; it sought to expand its hierarchical rule over different peoples under the universal order of Islam, much as the Holy Roman or Chinese empires assumed divine justification. Its empire had a traditional or land-based character. Rather than expanding through colonization, these empires grew via contiguous annexations, with the central government acting as a unified core in command of local elites who were subordinated to the imperial structure. This system conceptually and practically allowed for diversity—unlike in the nation-state, legitimacy was not based on a presumption of equality of citizens, but rather on subjects obeying an imperial sovereign, and thus different societies could be incorporated without necessarily being assimilated.[5]

The Ottomans practiced traditional empire as influenced by their Turkic tribal heritage and neighboring post-Mongol, Persianate civilizations. Originating from nomadic Turks who migrated into Anatolia in the wake of the Mongol invasions, the Ottomans early on adopted Islam as their state religion. "The transnational appeal of religion to other Muslims and the crusading zeal with which it inspired the faithful," writes Michael Doyle, "helped the Ottomans transcend the limits of tribal social organization." The Ottomans established both a religious-legal hierarchy to interpret sharia law and a military administration, largely composed of conscripted slave-soldiers (the janissaries), to uphold order. This dual-pillar system ensured that no one faction of government would be able to overpower the center.[6]

Another source of strength for the Ottomans was their ability to manage diversity, a demonstration of their pragmatism. The question of how to rule over a myriad of peoples arose early in Ottoman history. Although the dynasty was Muslim, their conquest of the Balkans soon

[5] Karen Barkey and Cecilia Giancola, "Empire and Nation-State," in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Global Social Theory*, ed. Gert Verschraegen and Raf Vanderstraeten (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803922126.00042, 190-91.
[6] Michael W. Doyle, *Empires*, Cornell Studies in Comparative History (Cornell University Press, 1986), 106-7.

gave the empire a Christian majority, and "it was only with the expansion of the empire into Arab lands in the sixteenth century that a balance between Christian and Muslim populations was reached." This forced the Ottomans to align with certain Christian groups in order to manage their new territories. In the tumultuous period of the Turkish migrations and invasions, this mixing of peoples made a multiplicity of traditions a salient element of Ottoman political consciousness. The Islamic tradition also influenced a tendency toward toleration. Doctrinally, Islam provided protected, though inferior, status to practitioners of other Abrahamic faiths (Jews and Christians). While the Ottoman state maintained a fundamentally Islamic identity, it could also pursue policies that took advantage of toleration without jeopardizing the basis of the state. This can be seen in the millet system, which organized Ottoman society between different faith communities and allowed them autonomy in religious matters. In creating this structure of intermediary administration, the sultans eased the burden of their rule, while also giving themselves the means to exploit tensions between groups to secure their power. This was also the case with Ottoman tolerance of diversity within Islam, as with the heterodox Sufi orders. Thus the empire could permit disagreement without giving rise to conflict.[7]

In the eighteenth century the traditional pillars of Ottoman society began to lose their effectiveness. The system of patronage that had allowed the center to manage local elites had turned into a system of tax farming that was contributing to decentralization. A private stratum of elites had emerged that, due to their control of tax revenue, was able to accrue its own power and resist attempts by Constantinople to bring it back under its control. The growing commercialization of the Ottoman economy also increased the salience of ethno-religious differences, since most of those who traded with Europe were Christians or Jews. According to

[7] Karen Barkey, "Rethinking Ottoman Management of Diversity," in *Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey*, ed. Ahmet T. Kuru and Alfred Stepan, Religion, Culture, and Public Life (Columbia Univ. Press, 2012) 14-24.

Karen Barkey, the growing prosperity of these groups engendered "resentment" among Muslims who became aware of how their religious identity led to disparity. The capitulations, treaties signed with the European powers which granted them rights over the affairs of religious minorities within the empire, enhanced these distinctions.[8]

By the time of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, after nearly 500 years the "decreasing ability of the empire to compete militarily and economically with its continental rivals" had become impossible to ignore. France was but one of the powers menacing Ottoman lands. Austria was advancing in the Balkans and Russia around the shores of the Black Sea; the 1774 treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji ceded Crimea and recognized Russian protection over Orthodox Christians in Ottoman territory. In Arabia, the Wahhabi movement led by the House of Saud was able to capture Mecca before being defeated by Ottoman and Egyptian forces in 1818. Although the holy city was retaken, this uprising shook the Ottoman leadership. Above all, it demonstrated that the power of the center was greatly diminished. Since 1726, administrators had been selected from the regions in which they were based rather than out of the heartland, increasing the influence of local power holders. Diverse systems of rule arose across the empire's territories, united only in how little control Constantinople was able to exert over them. Yet even were the Sultan in a position to confront these challenges, the systems that upheld the old dynasty were unequipped for the new international reality. The nation-states of Europe were beginning to muster their populations to work in factories and serve in modern armies. Meanwhile, the Ottoman economy was still preindustrial. Domestic industry was stifled by an unfavorable balance of trade created by the capitulations and the need to provision cheap goods that forced government borrowing. Coupled with inflation, along with the indemnities, lost territory, and

[8] Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge university press, 2008), 270-71, 279.

spending excesses from numerous military defeats, the government was left with a threadbare budget. "To far-sighted contemporaries," writes M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, "it was clear that the Ottoman order could survive only if the seepage of power from the center to the periphery were reversed, and if the empire could successfully adjust to new European realities, in particular the military might of the industrializing nation-state."[9]

Reforming the Empire

Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman sultans sought to reestablish their control over the state and reform administration to be more in line with the West. Recentralization of the empire also implied the overturning of the old order. As Kemal Karpat argues, a centralized state would require the government to serve not as an impartial arbiter of local interests, but as a power center that asserted its own interests onto the periphery, which in turn would require a new basis of political organization and administrator recruitment. The independent power of the religious scholars and the janissaries would need to be broken so that they could no longer collaborate with peripheral elites against the sultan. Sultan Selim III attempted to create a new army, but the janissaries rebelled in 1807 to prevent this. Mahmud II finally succeeded in 1826 in abolishing the janissary corps, as well as breaking apart the landholdings of entrenched notables. This enabled his son Abdul Mejid I to effect more far-reaching transformations of the Ottoman state that began the Tanzimat era.[10]

The so-called Tanzimat or reform decree promulgated on November 3, 1839 was couched in traditional verbiage. "In the last one hundred and fifty years," it states, "because of a succession of difficulties and diverse causes, the sacred Şeriat was not obeyed nor were the

[9] M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton university press, 2008), 6-8, 12-13, 17, 19-22, 40.
[10] Kemal H. Karpat, *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History: Selected Articles and Essays* (BRILL, 2002), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/detail.action?docID=253563, 38-41.

beneficent regulations followed; consequently, the former strength and prosperity [of the empire] have changed into weakness and poverty." Yet its prescription "to introduce new legislation to achieve effective administration of the Ottoman Government and Provinces" hardly followed traditional thinking to return to the purity of Islam. The proclamation in fact was a conceptually radical document which wed itself to European understandings of the state. It outlined three principles of reform: the guarantee of life, honor, and property; a regular taxation system; and a regular conscription regimen. These principles showed how officials sought not only to build a more centralized state, but to rethink the state as being the protector of its citizens' welfare. "The Muslim and non-Muslim subjects of our lofty Sultanate shall, without exception, enjoy our imperial concessions" it said; the empire would not be in service to any one group but to all those under Ottoman rule. Although the decree's assertion that, "by striving to find appropriate means, the desired results will, with the aid of God, be realized within five or ten years" proved pollyannaish, it certainly signified an intention to follow the nation-state model.[11]

With the destruction of the conservative military establishment, the religious scholars lost their main allies in the government. Subsequently, Ottoman politics would be dominated by the court and, increasingly, the expanding bureaucracy instituted by the reforms. Largely free from internal schisms, the central government was able to reassert its authority through alternatively applying pressure and incentives to local notables. As a result, in spite of territorial losses, "the state actually expanded the area under its direct administration" during this era. Besides achieving material improvement in the empire's administration, the bureaucrats, profoundly influenced by the theory and rhetoric of liberalism, hoped that reforms would win the respect of the West and allow the Ottoman Empire to be seen as an equal member of the European order.

[11] Akram Fouad Khater, "The Hatt-I-Sherif Decree," in *Sources in the History of the Modern Middle East* (Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 11-13.

The most profound demonstration of these aspirations was the adoption of equal citizenship within the empire. The legal classifications of Muslim, non-Muslim subjects (*dhimmi*), and non-Muslim foreigners were replaced by a division between Ottoman citizens and non-citizens (*ecnebi*), each defined irrespective of faith.[12]

This reclassification was outlined in a February 18, 1856 decree by Abdul Mejid I. He confirmed the pledge of the Tanzimat decree "to all the subjects of [his] empire, without distinction of classes or of religion, for the security of their persons and property, and the preservation of their honor…. Every distinction or designation pending to make any class whatever of the subjects of [his] empire inferior to another class, on account of their religion, language, or race, shall be forever effaced from administrative protocol." He also affirmed "no subject of my empire shall be hindered in the exercise of the religion that he professes," and that the tax system and civil service would treat different sects equally.[13]

This shift would upend the traditional Ottoman conception of nationality, the millet system, in favor of ethnic nationalism. Particularly among Christians, the conception of the millets as religious communities gave way to fragmentation based on linguistic and ethnic differences. Originally, there was a millet for Greeks (Orthodox Christians), Armenians (Oriental Christians), and Jews each. However, "in the second half of the nineteenth century the Christians began to be classified into ethnoconfessional categories—for example, Bulgarians, Maronites, Syriacs." The Greek war for independence of the 1820s had eliminated the main constituency of the Orthodox millet; subsequently, "the Serbians, Bulgarians, and Romanians established themselves as separate 'nations' with their own national churches." Not only the classification but the administration of the millets was reformed. Beginning in 1862, the Greek and Armenian

[12] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 59-60, 71-5.
[13] Khater, "Sultan Abdul Majid's Islahat Fermani Decree," in *Sources in the History of the Modern Middle East*, 15-18.

synods incorporated laymen alongside the clergy, and the patriarch became an elected office. This introduced the principle of representation for the first time into Ottoman life. The new system encouraged identification with a particular ethnic community over the broader millet.[14]

Alongside an interest in European ideas, the recognition of the danger posed by European aggression motivated increasing Ottoman engagement in international diplomacy. The Ottomans knew that they could not allow the European powers to decide their affairs for them. This required that they not only reshape their economy and military to be in line with Western standards, but also to conform to Western standards of governance. It was hoped that liberal reforms would assuage European public opinion, which was especially concerned with the position of Christians within the empire. Besides their closer alignment with Western ideals, the Ottomans hoped strategic concerns, especially of the British, would lead to a stronger partnership. Indeed the United Kingdom, wary of the Russian approach toward the passages to India, would come to the empire's defense in the Crimean War; the victory of the allied side in 1856 ensured the Ottomans a place in the European concert. But having accrued massive foreign debt due to the war, the Ottoman government defaulted in 1875. The default "raised doubts about the future viability of the empire and reduced British commitment to its integrity."[15]

Despite their efforts, the reforms would have a mostly surface-level impact on Ottoman culture and society as a whole. "The challenge of modernization coupled with the urge to preserve Ottoman and Islamic traditions reinforced a tense dualism evident in every field touched by the Tanzimat. The ideal of an overarching Ottoman identity clashed with the increasing autonomy of religious communities within the empire," especially as those communities increasingly came to identify as nations. As M. Şükrü Hanioğlu writes, "the lack of

[14] Kemal Karpat, "The Ottoman Ethnic and Confessional Legacy in the Middle East," in *Ethnicity, Pluralism, and the State in the Middle East*, 2. pr, ed. Milton J. Esman and Itamar Rabinovich (Cornell Univ. Pr, 1991), 40-43, 46-7.
[15] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 47-9, 77, 82, 92.

a centralized primary school system that could socialize young children as Ottomans, the high rates of illiteracy which limited the effects of the trumpeting of the new ideology in the press, and finally the view from the periphery which saw Ottomanism and centralization as policies of Turkification—all these resulted in the very partial success of reform."[16]

Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism

In the latter half of the Tanzimat era, the Young Ottoman movement emerged in response to the reforms of the central government. As Nader Sohrabi writes, the Young Ottomans simultaneously sought "continuity with the reforms, a deeper liberalism, and the attempt to come up with a genuine synthesis between the Western mode of governance and Islamic-Ottoman traditions." The Young Ottomans criticized the Tanzimat for wholesale adopting Western concepts of political philosophy without more than superficial reference to Islamic thought. On the other hand, they also saw equal citizenship, individual liberties, and a constitutional basis of government as essential features of reform that the Tanzimat had not yet delivered on. The Young Ottomans followed a unique practice of deriving concepts analogous to Western liberalism from Islamic tradition; these included representation, limited government, and the social contract, which they independently derived from interpreting Islamic doctrine. The culmination of these ideas was the movement for an Ottoman constitution, which would gain currency in the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century.[17]

The alternative to pan-religious Ottomanist sentiment was Islamism. There was an increasing sense of community among Ottoman Muslims, which existed in some tension with growing Turkish nationalism. Although Islam was the state religion and government was limited

[16] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 104-7.
[17] Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/detail.action?docID=833382, 39-41.

to Muslims, Muslims as such were not the ruling class of the empire. There was no millet for Muslims; neither were they classified along ethnolinguistic lines (nor indeed until the end of the empire). Instead, "the Ottomans used Islam to develop a culturally homogeneous Muslim community with a sense of religious identity that superseded the purely ethnic and linguistic attachments and loyalties." This process was aided by the secession of the Balkan provinces over the course of the nineteenth century, increasing the proportion of Muslims within the empire. As Christians turned to their new nation-states or to European powers for protection, Muslims looked to the Ottoman state as the embodiment of the Islamic nation.[18]

Opposition to the Tanzimat would unite conservatives and liberals in an unlikely alliance, one side angered at genuflection toward Europe and pandering toward non-Muslims, the other frustrated by lack of progress toward Western-style democracy, both opposed to the "dictatorship of the bureaucracy." These attitudes manifested in support for constitutionalism, which, thanks to the work of the Young Ottomans, found support among Islamists and the secular elite alike. By the 1860s, many autonomous regions of the empire, such as Serbia and Tunisia, had already enacted constitutions, which only served to emphasize the continued backwardness of the Ottoman state. The sultan hypothesized that a constitution would demonstrate to the European powers that the Ottomans had caught up to them and reassert Ottoman dignity in the midst of the 1876 Constantinople Conference, which had sidelined them in their own capital to attempt to reach peace over Russian designs on Bulgaria. The bureaucrats realized that a constitution could potentially act as a check on growing sultanic power. Thus, with all factions in concurrence on the need for a constitution, one was subsequently promulgated.[19] The 1876 Ottoman constitution established the first Ottoman parliament and declared the equality of Ottoman subjects before the

[18] Karpat, "The Ottoman Ethnic and Confessional Legacy in the Middle East," 44-5, 49-50.
[19] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 109-18.

law. It, however, largely failed in its goals. The European powers were dismissive; Russia and Bulgaria dealt a defeat to the empire, with the Congress of Berlin ceding other regions to European control. Compromise meant parliament was ineffective as a counterweight to either the bureaucracy or the sultanate. Thus it was with little resistance that Sultan Abdul Hamid II prorogued parliament indefinitely in 1878.

The new Hamidian regime would be autocratic and Islamist. But Abdul Hamid II would not entirely undo the legacy of the Tanzimat. Although the bureaucracy was once again subordinated to the court, the sultan saw that a modern, technocratic administration would enhance his own power. In other ways Abdul Hamid II used contemporary advances to institute a modern incarnation of the strong personalist rule of the early sultans. Strict censorship and propaganda created a personality cult, and new titles and ceremonies lent a spirit of grandeur to the proceedings of the court. He sought to counter the European powers by playing them off of each other, "maximizing the Ottoman Empire's weak potential abroad by staving off external threats to the empire through diplomacy." With the British no longer invested in the empire's protection, he increasingly courted Germany as a supporter in the west. At the same time, he also adopted an explicitly Sunni pan-Islamic ideology, emphasizing his role as caliph to assert control over Muslims worldwide. "In a multinational empire, crumbling most dangerously on its Christian periphery, Islam potentially represented a last line of defense against the corrosive effects of [ethnic] nationalism."[20]

Even so, the empire was losing ground to proto-nationalist groups, pushed by encroachment from the center and without the empire to defend their ethnic interests. Even among the majority-Muslim Albanians and Arabs, non-Muslims who shared their language would increasingly compete with their coreligionists for influence. Albanians in particular felt

[20] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 123-33, 142.

threatened by the expanding Christian nation-states of the Balkans and unsupported by the Ottoman government. With even Muslim subjects of the empire turning away from a shared Ottoman identity, some Turks began to advocate for their own national interests. A network of secret societies soon formed, coalescing into a movement that would be known in the West as the Young Turks. Organizing themselves in military clubs in Macedonia, they allied with Albanians and non-Muslims to launch a putsch in 1908. With the forces sent to put down the rebellion switching sides, the sultan's position was untenable, and Abdul Hamid II was compelled to reconvene parliament. The leading faction within the movement, the Committee of Union and Progress, pledged to institute a constitutional monarchy. But although genuine elections were held, the CUP maintained the character of a revolutionary secret society ruling from the shadows, justified by its role as the guarantor of Ottoman rejuvenation—much to the consternation of the liberal opposition. Committee rule frustrated many elements within Ottoman society, including liberals, bureaucrats, nationalists, localists, and Islamists, none of whom had their aims fully met by the calculating and pragmatic committeemen. The growth of opposition parties in the restored assembly challenged the CUP's dominance, ultimately leading to a loss of the CUP majority in 1912. But by a stroke of good fortune, the outbreak of war in the Balkans and subsequent Ottoman defeat discredited the new government. The following year, armed committeemen forced the grand vizier to resign, leading a purge of dissenting factions that would effectively establish a one-party state.[21]

The Young Turk movement had included heterogeneous groups, including not only Turkish nationalists but also liberal Ottomanists and Islamists. The CUP itself had no particular program and thus pursued its own power above all. Their prime threat was from the liberal faction, led by Prince Mehmed Sabahaddin, because the revolution had succeeded on the premise

[21] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 142-57.

of restoring liberal rights guaranteed by the constitution. Indeed, the movement itself had benefited from the freedom of the press under Western liberal regimes that it could not enjoy in Hamidian Turkey. Yet once in power, the committee could not allow such a freedom lest its own rule be undermined. Thus the press was heavily restricted after the 1913 coup, and liberal leaders and intellectuals were exiled from Constantinople in order to suppress contrary voices.[22]

The militarization of the CUP was what allowed it to maintain its power. Unable to articulate a coherent ideology other than the "unionist" idea of imperial preservation, it relied on force of arms to uphold this self-justifying aim. With the bureaucracy and parliament sidestepped by the committee, and the sultanate rendered powerless since the replacement of Abdul Hamid II with the puppet Mehmed V in 1909, the military returned to a decisive role it had not enjoyed since the abolishment of the janissaries. The CUP was thus successfully able to eliminate the threat from rival factions within the government.[23]

The threat that remained was that of ethnic separatism and European encroachment. The center was hanging on to the frontier provinces of the empire by a thread. First to go were Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, assaulted by the Italians in 1911—not without some difficulty, but ultimately not enough to prevent their loss in 1912. As that war drew to a close the Balkan states set aside their quarrels to attack Rumelia as a unified front. Macedonia was divided between Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece; Albania declared independence; and all that remained of Turkey-in-Europe after the 1913 Treaty of London were Eastern Thrace and Constantinople itself. For the unionists, these wars had been an unmitigated disaster. Thousands of Balkan Muslim refugees fled violence at the hands of their Christian neighbors. The grand, cosmopolitan

[22] Christine Philliou, "Liberalism and the Path to Treason in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1923," in *Negotiating Democracy and Religious Pluralism: India, Pakistan, and Turkey*, ed. Karen Barkey et al., Modern South Asia (Oxford University Press, 2021), 61-70.
[23] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 161-4.

empire of three continents had been reduced to an Islamic West Asian state. This loss was not only a blow to Ottoman prestige, but a repudiation of the Ottomanist project of incorporating different religious groups into a shared Ottoman community. With the vast majority of the empire's subjects now being Muslims, Unionism would adopt a more Islamic character, focusing on working with the Arabs who constituted the empire's largest minority.[24]

On the international front, the Balkan wars demonstrated more than ever the need to end the empire's diplomatic isolation, something the CUP had unsuccessfully struggled to overcome. All the great power proclamations ensuring the protection of Ottoman territorial integrity had come to naught; only cold national interest would compel one of the powers to come to their aid. At the same time, the Ottomans could not afford to alienate any of the European empires, lest they suffer further depredations. After reaching understandings with the Russians in the Caucasus and the British in southern Arabia, the Ottomans finally secured an alliance with Germany in July 1914. The Ottomans hoped that their new partner would protect them. A few months later, however, it would drag them into a war they would not survive.[25]

[24] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 167, 171-3.
[25] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 174-7.

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An Interview with Dr. Folarin Ajibade, Assistant Professor of African History, concerning his academic journey, current works, and experience in academia.

Interviewer: Isabella Lipham

My first question is quite broad, but generally, what are your academic interests? And then, what inspired you to enter and engage with the world of historical academia?

Interviewee: Folarin Ajibade

My academic interest, broadly, is in everyday life, regardless of the theme. It could be, I don't know, broad economic history, political history. What I'm always interested in is how that affects the everyday person. Because I think that is, to me, one of the most neglected forms of history, at least, in African history. This gap in African history has to do with archives. People's voices are missing from the archives, typically, because most of the time, what you used to get, not anymore anyways, of course, it's changing, but what you used to engage with were colonial archives, colonial documentation, or documentation of the elites, because they tend to be the ones who are visible. And so what's missing are the voices of, you know, everyday people, which is not to say those voices are monolithic, but those voices, I think, are expansive enough to get you a broader picture about what a particular time period space was like, and that's what I'm particularly interested in. It is not to say that I completely ignore what we would call elite histories, but it is to say that for anything that I want to engage in, for example, in the class that I'm teaching about urban Africa, yes, we're thinking about infrastructure. We're thinking about statistics and demographics, and urban policy, but predominantly, what I'm interested in is how Africans, without to a certain extent, access, engage with the city, and how they move and live in the city; it's what informs my teaching, it's also what informs my research.

How did I end up in history? Just twists and turns, to be honest. I didn't do history in undergrad. I went to college at UW-Madison, a big state school. I thought I was going to be a doctor. I was doing pre-med for many reasons, but mainly because it was expected to do medicine. I was taking sciences like biology and chemistry, all that stuff. Then I got to college, realized I didn't really like the classes I was in, and it felt like a drag. I couldn't picture myself doing four years of that. To be honest, neither of my parents is a scientist. My dad is a journalist. My mom is a teacher, so the humanities were already in the family. It just didn't seem very feasible as a sort of, I don't know, career path. And then, fortunately for me, when I was there, UW-Madison got federal funding to study what they called 'World Cultures'. They arguably had, apart from Northwestern, one of the best African Studies programs in the US. At the time, I had no idea. And then, I think it was my sophomore year, spring semester, I was looking for courses to take. I was like, Oh, someone is teaching a class on the global African city. And I'm from Lagos, which is a big city. Small in size, but big in terms of people, demographics, sort of smaller than New York, but about, I think, two or three times the population. So I thought, you know, it'd be great to study something that I perhaps sort of recognize. And I got in there, and I realized that I actually didn't know much about the place that I was from. I was learning about it, not in Lagos, but in Madison, Wisconsin. And it was a history class. That arguably changed my trajectory. I took it with someone called Emily Kalachi, whose book I was teaching in class yesterday, but I still didn't end up majoring in history. I switched from pre-med, and I was doing economics and African literature. African literature, because I liked reading and was familiar with it. I focused on economics because I was also still thinking pretty practically. At the time, I didn't realize how applicable history could be, or how applicable historical studies could be; I was thinking that economics would open up many possibilities.

And then my senior year, I was about to graduate, and I knew for a fact I didn't want to do a nine-to-five. I just needed a break. I felt kind of like, disillusioned, maybe a bit. I just didn't want to work in a bank or in consulting. It just didn't move me. It doesn't move me. But I knew I was going to go to grad school at some point. I just didn't know in what yet. Then I talked to a couple of my professors. I went back to Emily, and she said, "You know, I remember your essays and all the things that you sort of described to me. You realize history is broad enough where you can engage with all of those ideas." And then I went back home to Lagos for a year just to breathe and actually take the time to think about the project and what I wanted to send to grad schools.

When I went back home, I thought about the project. The project that I proposed is still the same one I'm working on now, which is gambling in Lagos, and gambling also this broad way of engaging with citizenship and belonging and being in a city and being in a nation state where perhaps you don't have as much access to or you don't have as much power as a citizen and as a person, I would argue, and gambling as a means of engaging with this idea. And I proposed it to a couple of places, got into a few, and decided to go to NYU because I wanted to be in the city, and because my advisor, Mike Gomez, seemed the most interested in the project. He was already talking to me as a scholar, and I wasn't even in the program yet, but he was really seriously engaged with the project, and I thought it was the best place for me at the time, and I really never regretted it. That's how I ended up here, I guess. Yeah, and then after NYU, I graduated, and, fortunately, got a job at Florida State. I missed New York and the Northeast. Fortunately, this position at Bard opened up, and I applied.

Isabella

My other question was actually about your project, because I saw in your bio that your most recent project, and the one that you've been working on, is focused on the history of gambling in urban Nigeria from the 1880s onward, and the political and social history of that practice. I think you already kind of touched on this, but can you tell me a little bit about what led you to this project, your research, and the methodologies you've used, especially given the archival gaps you mentioned earlier?

Professor Ajibade

Absolutely, it largely came from observing. I went home. I was in Lagos. I hadn't been there for a while. Also, I think when I left Nigeria in Lagos, it was still in my conception that I was a child. I'd grown up a bit in college, which completely changed the way I saw things. I remember quite vividly being in Lagos and just seeing all of these—it's hard to explain them, but if you've never seen them before. There are these kiosks. Imagine a food truck, right? And all these are places for gambling, for number gambling in particular. And apart from that, there are all these other like hubs, sort of buildings with slot machines and sports betting TVs, places where folks could gather, predominantly men, but not solely men. There's also a weird gender dynamic: most of the gamblers are men, but most of the people working at these spots are women, which is intentional from the shop owners' perspective, as they try to attract a particular clientele. But I noticed these kiosks on the side of the street, and it was like you're driving down a block or down the street—you see a church, because religion is very big in Nigeria, in particular in the city—you see a church, you see a mosque, you see a gambling kiosk, you see a church, you see a gambling kiosk, you see a church, you see a gambling umbrella. I was like: Oh, my God, these are the three things that seem to define the urban architecture here to me. It's

either a church, a mosque, a gambling kiosk, or a gambling parasol, like an umbrella, and someone is sitting down in a chair. I thought it was fascinating.

At the time, I didn't think it was scholarly enough. Then I did a bit more reading, and I realized people hadn't actually taken this stuff seriously. I did some archival work, I looked at some newspapers, and then I started to think: *Oh, well, through gambling, we could see how the government is trying to control the citizens, how it conceptualizes the idea of discipline, how it is also culpable, and this idea of discipline, this responsibility and how the citizens use this idea of gambling, which is not just private, it was also sort of pretty much controlled by the government, how they use that as a way to sort of negotiate their own citizenship and their belonging in the Nigerian space, the Nigerian nation state, and Lagos, as well as how gambling became this sort of tool, means of tug of war between the federal state*, because Nigeria is supposedly, in practice, it really isn't, but in theory, it's meant to be sort of Federalist. And gambling, again, was a tool that folks were really fighting on. The contention was really intense in the 60s and 70s, and it still hasn't been sorted out. And I was just really fascinated by that. I thought, you know, here's the thing that people sort of denigrate and see as an activity that only poor folks partake in. But it wasn't like that at all for me, and I don't know, I was just far less interested in the morality question, not because I don't think it's significant or important, but because I think it's reductive. And that's how I got to the project that I proposed, and it's still in, sort of, the developmental stages. Yes, there's a dissertation, but it will take, I think, a bit more work to turn into a book.

Then, archival sources, I have to be really, really inventive, because, as you can imagine, most of the sort of writing and conversation about gambling is about gambling as a criminal activity, or gambling as vice, or gambling as something that only delinquents partake in. And so, yes, I engaged with colonial documents, archives, and government reports; however, I also

looked at probably 700 to 1000 newspapers, because that, to me, was the voice of, to put it very loosely, the Voice of the masses. I am not saying the newspapers didn't have their own biases, but they added more to the conversation. I also did ethnographic interviews. I hope to have a chapter that engages solely with photographs and visual culture, because that is fascinating to me. As a historian, I think the field is moving in a way where you can't be solely limited to textual evidence and textual archives, and you have to engage with a lot of other disciplines. I engage with music, popular music, a lot. I've tried to work on films and the depiction of gambling, chance, and risk in African films. I've had to be really creative with my sources, but I also think it makes the project richer, right? Because then you sort of are thinking about this concept as a whole.

Isabella

This question is related to what you just said, but are there any specific methodological approaches you use in your work in historical academia? How do these methods either inform your own research or your teaching style?

Professor Ajibade

That's a good question. Yes, I think if you talk to any African historian, we, in a way, are forced to be creative. It's quite different from studying places where you have a trove of texts or archives, because then you have multiple, varied perspectives. It took a long time for African history to be taken seriously. Why? Because there was this argument that most of the histories were oral, and that oral histories, supposedly, at the time, this is like what the 60s, 70s, were biased and subjective, but that assumes that textual archives are not. So it took a very long time for the field to be taken seriously. I'm a product of all those historians who have done that work for me, which is why I can do a project on gambling and be, to be honest, taken seriously. It's

because I'm, you know, standing on the shoulders of those people who have already done that work, who've made the sort of theoretical arguments for the importance of oral histories, the importance of ethnographic interviews, the importance of photographs and films, as opposed to solely engaging with text. So I think it allows me to be more expansive in my thinking. It allows me, I don't want to use the word recover, but to foreground voices that perhaps have been marginalized or silenced within historical archives, or even voices that perhaps don't exist. Then I can find them simply by looking at an image, seeing someone on the side, and going: What is that person doing in this space that they are supposedly not meant to be in? At least then I know that that person exists. For example, I think I remember seeing a photo of a very run-down gambling shop, and there's a little girl on the side. If I were reading a description of that space, people, perhaps, never paid attention to that little girl, and I thought to myself: Oh, the fact that she's there perhaps means that this is a space that isn't seen by this community as a space of vice or a space of delinquency. Rather, it's a space that fits into the everyday. The little girl can be there because she fits into the community, and the gambling shop itself is simply a part of it. Perhaps the people in there might be seen as delinquents, but the space itself is not necessarily seen that way. That, for me, was fascinating.

I think my teaching benefits from this expansive approach because I'm in a space where perhaps Africa hasn't featured as much, in the sense that I am an African historian at Bard in New York, in the US. To put it very loosely, like people just haven't cared as much, if perhaps you have no investment, right? And perhaps that's also because people just don't know that much about it. And Africa, to a certain extent, has been sort of pushed aside, not by African stories, not by policymakers, but, you know, in the zeitgeist. In popular culture, you're thinking about it pretty reductively. And I think engaging with all those sources that perhaps are not solely textual

allows me to bring folks in and to say, Okay, here's a thing that perhaps you haven't thought of, but it's actually quite similar to the experiences that you've had. You know, Africans are not that different. It's why I teach many films in my classes. I like using music because it's engaging and accessible, as opposed to the really intense kind of historical analysis, which I would love for people to do but which I also recognize might push them away. So it's a balance, you know, I'm trying to figure out a way to sort of get folks in and interested in the content and the continent, not solely as a thing that exists outside of their sense of the globe, but as a thing within it. And I think that that is perhaps another reason why I'm engaging with all of these various kinds of archives, you know, it's personal, epistemological. And I think it's also just very practical.

Isabella

Thank you. My last question was, as a Professor, what are some of the classes that you've really enjoyed teaching? What are some future courses that you are looking forward to teaching?

Professor Ajibade

That's a great question. I really, really enjoy my pop culture class. I've only been here for, what, a year now, and I've taught it in the fall and in the spring, and it seems to work. Of course, the problem with that is I get a lot of students who are not Historical Studies majors, and they see 'pop culture' in the title, and assume it's solely going to be about the contemporary period. And then we get into the class, and we begin from the *Epic of Sundiata*, which was around the 14th, 15th century, but we're thinking about an epic, and it's jarring for them. But I really love that class because I've noticed that people are very engaged with it, and also perhaps because we're engaging with themes I think that are familiar to you, and that are familiar to this age, and are familiar to a particular sort of young people, a particular sort of context.

I taught the intro to African history survey in the fall, which was sort of a global Africa since the 1880s. I really enjoyed that as well, because it was my first time teaching that course, and you also have to be a bit creative when teaching a survey. You can't cover the entire continent. It's a huge continent, so you can't do that. But I really enjoy teaching that, too. Right now, I'm teaching my urban African class, which is 'African Cities'. That's very fun. It's not a very big class. We're about five in there, but it's so engaging. We always go beyond the class period. I enjoy this class because we have one historical studies person, one sociologist, one architecture student, and another film student, and everyone brings in these varied perspectives. And for that class, we're also reading a lot more kinds of secondary sources and very deep, I think, very deep and serious historical analysis.

In the future, I'm excited to teach a class on film in Africa, where we'd watch a lot of films and engage with them. I think films as historical sources are really key. I also just think it's fun to talk about films in a way, and to think about the process of filmmaking and stuff on the content. But I would love to teach a class on music in Africa and the diaspora, broadly. In the fall, I'm teaching a class on Africa in the American imagination. I titled it "Africa in the Americas" because we're thinking about Latin America, the Caribbean, and the US, and how the real, and imagining ideas about Africa have informed these other places. Then I'm teaching the other section of the survey class, which is "Global Africa before the 1880s", which should be fun, because it's not my specialty, because I tend to think of myself as a modernist. But I think this would be very useful for me as a scholar, and also helpful for the students, to introduce them to a world, perhaps, that they don't think about very much, apart from, maybe, like Egypt and Carthage and, you know, Alexandria, these sort of places. I want them to think about Africa, south of the Sahara, before colonization, and to recognize that this is a collection of many places

that were really vibrant. There was a lot of stuff happening before the Europeans got there. I'm conceptualizing a class on vice, of course, because that is what the project is on. I want to teach a class on constructing vice in Africa, and perhaps also thinking about it globally, maybe not just in Africa. We'll see. This one is in the works, but I'm working on a common course with Tabetha. I think that one will be a common course on risk and chance. I'm excited about that. What else? Yeah, I was talking to people about perhaps teaching a class on black experimentalism. We'll see that as well.

Oh, I have all these ideas, of course, but it's early days. But my point is, I'm trying to think of courses that are grounded in historical studies, but are not solely about history and historical studies, because I think that is sort of how I am as a scholar, and I'm hoping it is how I am as a teacher as well.

A Comparative Based Analysis: The Bengal Famines of 1770 and 1943

Tahia Prachyo

Introduction:

For my research paper, I will look at two famines that have occurred in the Indian Subcontinent; this will be a comparative-based analysis, but more specifically, a case-based analysis. The famines in question are the Great Bengal Famine of 1770 and the Bengal Famine of 1943, which were natural and political, respectively. Essentially, this will be a comparative analysis of two different famines, one natural and the other political (mainly manmade) that have happened in one geographical area.

There are multiple reasons why the two famines are compared. First and foremost, the region of Bengal has been susceptible to natural famines throughout history, which is why the famine of 1943 (manmade) was dismissed as natural by the British Raj in an effort to justify their prioritization to export food to their troops during WW2 over their colonized Bengali subjects. Secondly, both the famines of 1770 and 1943 occurred during British colonial rule in India; the former wreaking havoc following the transfer of power from the Mughal to the British (known as *diwani* rights or right to collect revenue) and the latter occurring due to overarching World War 2 politics.

Some of the aspects of both famines that we need to consider are: Bengal's agriculture, taxation, and the colonial power involved. Despite occurring two centuries apart, both of the famines were exacerbated by British colonial policies which is one of the criteria for comparison. However, what makes the famine of 1943 man-made is the fact that provisions were only directed to Allied war efforts despite the availability of food. In both cases, the British administration failed to implement effective relief measures. Little effort was undertaken to provide food or reduce taxes in 1770. And in 1943, the British government didn't stop rice exports or seek relief for Bengalis. Indian agriculture is also an element to factor in, as the

agriculture tends to be quite unstable during the summer and monsoon. Therefore, this research paper seeks to answer the following question: How does the Bengal Famine of 1770 compare to the Bengal Famine of 1943 in terms of their causes and effects? This paper argues that the Bengal famine of 1770 was natural and the Bengal famine of 1943 was political, even though both had occurred under British rule.

Theory and Concepts: How the British Came to Power

The *British Raj,* or the British colonial rule in India, lasted around two hundred years, from 1757 to 1947. With the advent of the British East India Company (EIC), India found herself under British control and then officially under the direct rule of the British Crown from 1858 to 1947. The British Raj took possession of the EIC's assets and imposed direct rule on the Indian subcontinent following a "general distrust and dissatisfaction with company leadership" leading to a "widespread mutiny of sepoy troops in 1857, causing the British to "reconsider the structure of governance in India" (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025, para. 1). The EIC's power grew further after overthrowing the *nawab* [ruler] of Bengal and "installing a puppet in 1757" (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025, para. 1). Eventually, in 1770, the company's control over Bengal was "effectively consolidated" when the first governor-general of Bengal, Warren Hastings brought the nawab's "administrative offices to Calcutta under his oversight." (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025, para. 3). Simultaneously, the Parliament of Britain started to regulate the EIC through "successive India Acts" which brought Bengal under the indirect control of the British Raj (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025, para. 3).

During the 1770 famine, the British East India Company (EIC) took control of Bengal and levied land taxes on farmers. However, the famine was still mostly natural in its inception, even though the British aggravated it with land taxes. The primary trigger of the famine was a lack of

rainfall and collapse of agriculture. On the other hand, the famine of 1943 was deliberately manufactured through a scorched earth campaign that included "boat denial scheme" and "rice denial scheme" in order to deter a Japanese invasion (Greenough 1982, 94). The methodology will unfold the comparison and contrast of the two famines.

Methodology: A Comparative-Based Analysis

For this section, I have read scholarly articles and history books on both topics. Additionally, I utilize the Scottish historian Sir William Winston Hunter's *Annals of rural Bengal* and American historian John Fiske's *The Unseen World* for the natural famine, as the two sources are pertinent in providing information on the natural famine. Findings of the researchers Akhlak Ur Rahman, Radhakumud Mookerji, and Vinita Damodaran will be incorporated in the analysis as well. For the political famine, information from the following scholars and researchers: Lizzie Collingham, Paul R. Greenough, Amartya Sen, Jason Hickel, Bas Dianda, and Madhushree Mukherjee will be of utmost importance.

<u>The Natural Famine: Bengal Famine of 1770</u>

While the Bengal Famine of 1770 had some political aspects considering India at the time was under the EIC, it was still natural for the most part—-the region of Bengal was always susceptible to droughts and famine. Note that even though this famine is referred to as the Bengal Famine of 1770, it neither started in 1770 nor did it end in the same year. As the Mughals transferred *diwani* right (the right to collect revenue) to the EIC, agricultural and economic changes inadvertently caused the famine in an already arid area (Rahman 2020, 4). Bangladeshi historian Akhlak Ur Rahman, in his work *Reasons behind the Great Bengal Famine in 1770 British Claim vs Reality*, noted that in December of 1768, Bengal had a partial failure of crops due to insufficient rain, and in early 1769, the price of grain increased. By December of 1769,

"Bengal faced a complete failure in crop production and the price of rice got higher" and by February 1770, "70% of rice crops were lost and price had gone up to 10 times more than usual" (Rahman 2020, 8). On top of that, Murshidabad district saw an outbreak of smallpox.

Scottish historian and colonial administrator Sir William Winston Hunter in his *Annals of Rural Bengal* has noted that Lower Bengal has three harvests every year: a "pulse crop in spring"; a "important rice crop in autumn"; "a great rice crop" in December, but owing to the "rice failure in early 1768" and the "rains of 1769," food availability seemed abysmal (Hunter 1871, 20-21). Hunter quoted a letter from the President and Council to the Court of Directors, dated Fort William, 30th September 1769, "In the early part of 1769, high prices had ruled, owing to the partial failure of crops in 1768, but the scarcity had not been so severe as materially to affect the government rental" (20). What the Fort William letter meant was that when the food prices were high due to partial crop failures, it wasn't severe enough to affect the revenue that the government collected through land taxes or rentals. This also means that while food was expensive due to limited supply, the crisis wasn't severe enough to significantly affect the government's tax allocation system. However, the British did not take into account that the absence of rain or too much rain can cause unprecedented circumstances.

The rain in the north of Bengal caused a significant inundation, leading to a temporary loss and in the "succeeding year of the general famine, the whole southeast of Bengal uttered no complaint." (21). Just as too much rain causes inundation leading to agricultural failure, periodical rains are necessary for a sufficient crop yield. Unfortunately, the September Harvest of 1769 saw no rain in the same year when the inundation happened: "[I]n that month the periodical rains prematurely ceased, and the crop which depended on them for existence withered" (21). American historian John Fiske and Hunter both quoted Bishenpore district's superintendent that

due to the parching drought in autumn (September of 1769) rice fields "became fields of dried straw"(Fiske 1904, 192; Hunter 1871, 21).

In *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses: Case Studies toward a Global Environmental History,* contemporary historian Vinita Damodaran provides a salient insight as to why the agricultural economy in lowland Bengal failed. With more than "two-thirds of the population engaged in agriculture—predominantly rice" and almost entirely dependent on enough and well-distributed rain "to the extent that any deficiency in the actual rainfall meant that the harvest for that year would be reduced" (Damodaran 2009, 199). Absence of rainfall is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, rice cultivation in Bengal was extremely susceptible to drought, and in years where there weren't enough or failed rice harvests to begin with, "rice tracts had no other crops to fall back on" (199-200). In other words, fields reserved for rice cultivation weren't arable enough to cultivate other crops, even if said fields failed to yield rice. Secondly, rural farmers who cultivated the land didn't own any land. Instead, they paid land taxes to *zamindars* (hereditary revenue collectors of the Mughal Empire) as part of a taxation system that continued well into the period of the British Raj. Under British rule, this taxation system had become even worse for farmers because "revenue demand … escalated" as the *zamindars* were required to pay more to British revenue collectors. Consequently, the *zamindars* increased the already burdensome taxes on the farmers, most of whom were "sharecroppers" and "landless laborers" (200).

Furthermore, high land taxation left farmers with little time to invest in agricultural improvements (Hunter 1871, 21). As the EIC obtained the *diwani* of Bengal in 1765, it gave them significant control over revenue collection, which reinforced a top-down taxation system. As mentioned earlier, with increased taxation, the zamindars felt pressure from the EIC to

maximize revenue collection, which in turn forced already poor rural peasants to pay more taxes. However, zamindars were not always able to extract sufficient revenue from the peasants, nor were they always willing to pay the EIC large sums either. In *The Diwani and the Bengal Famine of 1770*, historian Radhakumud Mookerji (1944) noted:

> The Zamindars not being willing or able to pay the sums required, the Company thought of the ruinous device of appointing their own agents to replace the Zamindars for the purpose of rack-renting the Ryots. These agents were known as *Ąumils*. This system of replacing the device of Permanent Settlement with the Zamindars by that of appointing officials, like *Aumils*, to deal directly with the Ryots [peasant cultivators or hired laborers]and to squeeze the utmost out of them by subjecting them to a process of ruthless rack-renting was one of main causes that led up to the unprecedented famine of 1770. According to the authoritative statement of Warren Hastings the Bengal Famine of 1769-70 carried away "at least one-third of the inhabitants of the province," while the Court of Directors expressed their deliberate opinion that "the Ryots were compelled to sell their rice to monopolising Europeans who could be no other than persons of rank in our service." (483).

Mookerji's explanation demonstrates that even though the *zamindars* were unable to collect revenues or poor peasants struggled to pay their due, it didn't matter to the EIC and they didn't hesitate to extract as much money as possible for profit, further aggravating the plight of the poor peasants during the famine. Rack renting is a process that allowed the *Aumils* deployed by the British to charge exorbitant amounts of rent that resulted in the displacement of peasants who further perished in the famine.

Extraction wasn't the only device utilized by the British in aggravating the natural famine, they were also culpable of negligence when it came to responding to requests for aid to mitigate the devastation of the famine. As calamitous predictions were common in Bengal, the British governor "declined to transmit the alarm" (Hunter 21). This was partly because local officials in Bengal cried "wolf" too often and the British government was slow to believe them and announced "nothing better could be expected than the adoption of a generous policy toward those landholders whom the loss of harvest had rendered unable to pay their land-tax" (Fiske

1904, 193). The Central Government responded too late and despite various alarms from several districts in Bengal, the Bengal Council believed "the question to be chiefly one of revenue" and the "utmost that could be expected from the [British] Government would be a lenient policy towards the husbandmen whom a bad harvest had disabled from paying the usual land tax" (Hunter 23). Even though it was common to ask for aid and temporary remissions in periods "whenever a harvest proved to be deficient" during 1769-70, such indulgences were not granted "except in a very few isolated instances" (23).

There was also an issue of depopulation even at the time of the great harvest in 1770 as aid arrived too late. Fiske eloquently sums up his findings in the following quotation:

> In 1770, the rainy season brought relief, and before the end of September, the [Bengal] province reaped an abundant harvest. But the relief came too late to avert depopulation. Starving and shelterless crowds crawled desperately from one deserted village to another in a vain search for food, or a resting-place in which to hide themselves from the rain. The epidemics incident to the season were thus spread over the whole country; and until the close of the year, disease continued to be so prevalent as to form a subject of communication from the government in Bengal to the Court of Directors. Millions of famished wretches died in the struggle to live through the few intervening weeks that separated them from the harvest, their last gaze being probably fixed on the densely-covered fields that would only ripen a little too late for them (195).

Before the end of May 1770, "one-third" of Bengal's population had vanished, and in June of the same year, it was estimated that "six of every sixteen inhabitants" and "one half of the cultivators and payers of revenue [would] perish with hunger." (Damodaran 202). Drawing upon Warren Hastings's written account in 1772, Damodaran noted that "failure of a single crop, following a year of scarcity, had wiped out ten million human beings" (202-203).

In *Some of the Results of the Great Bengal and Bihar Famine of 1770*, historian Nani Gopal Chaudhuri touches on the reasons behind depopulation. Firstly, the tendency of hungry people to migrate in search of food compelled them to leave their homes. Secondly, during the famine, "the oppression committed by the Collectors of Revenue compelled the ryots to leave their hearth and

home and to seek shelter in some other countries [other towns or villages] where they might live in peace" (Chaudhuri 1949, 240). Thirdly, in the event the EIC found that there may be a decrease in revenue, they curtailed expenses they deemed unnecessary; this resulted in the job loss of servants who now can't find jobs in the *diwani* provinces, including Bengal. Although Purnia and Bishnupur were two districts in Bengal that suffered the most during the famine, Chaudhuri looked at a moderately afflicted district, Rajshahi in order to avoid statistical exaggeration:

> In the Bengali year 1175 (1768-1769 A.D) there were 1076 families in the four sub-divisions. Out of them 1033 families survived at the end of the year 1176 (1769-1770 A.D.). In the year 1177 (1770-1771 A.D) which was the year of mortality and desertion, the remaining 1033 families were further reduced to 373 families. This reduction was due to desertion of 153 families and death of the members of 507 families. Thus in the course of the famine there was a reduction of 703 families out of 1076 families on account of death and desertion i.e. there was a reduction of about 66 per cent of families. Of this 66 per cent reduction, 10 per cent was due to desertion and 47 per cent, due to death. This percentage of mortality and desertion in the four sub-divisions of Rajshahi roughly speaks for the whole affected area of Bengal. (241).

The governor-general of India, Warren Hastings has stated that Bengal lost at least "one-third of its people" and "one-third of its surface" quickly became waste because depopulation is followed by a proportionate area of land "falling out of tillage" meaning it can no longer be cultivated (Hunter 58). In Bengal, harvests were insufficient, especially due to the monsoon that led to a shortfall of produce in 1768-69, which brought about a prolonged drought. Not only did heavy rain and monsoon make matters worse, but complacency from British authorities was a factor as well.

The Political Famine: Bengal Famine of 1943

Unlike the famine of 1770, which was natural in its inception, the Bengal famine of 1943 was highly political as it was man-made due to Allied War efforts and to deter the Japanese from invading India to pose a threat to the British Empire following the Fall of Burma during WW2. Essentially, the '43 famine was a deliberate result of a "scorched earth" campaign. What makes the famine of '43 distinct from that of the 1770 one is that there was enough food during the former unlike the latter but it was deliberately not given to the locals. What adds to the famine's unfortunateness is it was exacerbated by wartime policies, economic mismanagement, and inequalities. For context, a scorched earth campaign is a military strategy of destroying anything (e.g., natural resources, provisions, subsistence, people) that can be utilized by an enemy army. Notably, British colonial motivation to carry out a scorched earth campaign to deter the Japanese invasion of India under British rule, as well as prioritizing feeding troops in Allied forces, were some of the key factors in causing the famine. This destructive campaign was carried out through a series of "denial policies" which primarily affected the rural poor (e.g., boatmen, farmers) to preclude resources from falling into Japanese hands in the event of an invasion. The denial policies included confiscating or destroying food stocks, boats, and other means of transportation from Bengal. Previously, the British lost Burma (Myanmar), which was part of the British Empire to the Japanese by 1942 during the Second World War. Consequently, the British feared losing Bengal (another part of their empire) to the Japanese and felt it necessary to implement a scorched earth campaign in Bengal.

In the third chapter titled, "Disaster, Disorder, and the Market Origins of the Famine" in *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, historian Paul R. Greenough noted that the "boat denial scheme" tended to throw peasants out of employment especially in "May 1942 for fear of a Japanese invasion in Bengal through the lower Delta" so any boat "capable of carrying ten or

more persons" were either removed or destroyed (Greenough 1982, 89). In addition to the boat denial scheme, "rice denial" had been implemented to frustrate a Japanese invasion in lower Bengal but all it did was cripple "commercial exchanges" in the following districts in Bengal: Midnapur, Khulna, and Bakarganj between April and May 1942 (94). As boatmen, fishermen, and farmers all depended on each other, rice denial and boat denial policies of the British affected them tremendously. This interdependency is described as "exchange entitlements" by the economist Amartya Sen (1981) in the sixth chapter titled "The Great Bengal Famine" of his seminal work *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. To him, the more plausible cause is the "entitlement-failure," which can occur even when there is no decline in aggregate food production (Sen 1981, 63-70). Essentially, "exchange entitlement" defines the ability of individuals to obtain food or other necessities by exchanging their own possessions or income in the market. When these demographics of rural peasants (e.g. boatmen, fishermen, farmers and their families) lose their "exchange entitlement" it ultimately results in what Sen describes as "entitlement failures" which is the inability of individuals to to acquire resources like food due to disruptions in their entitlements (wage, tradable goods, livestock, etc). Sen found that exchange entitlements were severely disrupted due to inflation, declining wages, and rising food prices. These rural peasants found themselves unable to afford food to feed themselves and their families, even though it was available in the market. Sen's analysis stresses that famines can occur not just due to food shortages but because people's entitlements to access food are undermined.

Similarly, Greenough in the fourth chapter "Disaster, Disorder, and the Market Origins," in *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal* also affirms Sen's "exchange entitlements." The boatmen had to yield their boats to the British in order to as part of a "boat denial scheme" which

falls under the broader “denial policies” to deter the Japanese from utilizing the boats to transport artillery through the lower Delta in Bengal. (Greenough 1982, 89). Consequently, the boatmen lost their exchange entitlement: they can no longer transport people and goods for a wage to buy food for themselves and their families. With the boatmen no longer able to provide their services, the fishermen also lost their “exchange entitlement" as they were dependent on the boatmen to take them to their fishing grounds (to catch fish in order to sell them to earn a livable wage in return). In addition to the fishermen and boatmen, another group that lost their “exchange entitlement” was the farmers. As another defense measure for war efforts, the British took possession of the farmlands to repurpose them as “airstrips and camps” and as a result, have “driven between 30,000 and 36,000 families (about 150,000 to 180,000 persons) off their land” (90). This meant that farmers and their families not only became displaced but also lost their source of income through arable lands. Greenough found that as these peasants could no longer trade with one another and lost their source of income and land, they perished in the famine further affirming Sen’s theory of exchange entitlement.

The staple food of Bengalis, irrespective of their socioeconomic status is rice and fish. Greenough finds the war having an immediate impact on the price of rice. Prices rose steadily after September 1939, but it saw no necessary relationship to agricultural production but largely reflected inflation as the government of India let large contracts “gear up the war effort.”(92). Compared to most commodities, food grains, particularly rice yield, rose in Bengal exponentially but by December 1942, rice was twice as expensive as it had been before the war. After March 1942, the rapid rise in prices represented the great demand for Bengal rice from other rice-consuming provinces. As Burma fell in April 1942, the mechanism that balanced the supply and demand for rice in Bengal was, all of a sudden, ruptured. Burma was an important rice

exporter to Bengal, so the Japanese invasion and the subsequent "boat denial" policies implemented by the British disrupted the flow of rice from Burma to Bengal. Similarly, Sen also agrees that the price of rice indeed soared expeditiously. Furthermore, he attributes the rise in fish prices in Bengal as a result of the "boat denial policy" implemented to deny the possible arrival of the Japanese, interfering with both river transport and fishing.

Eswatini-British economic anthropologist Jason Hickel (2020) in his article "How British Colonizers Caused the Bengal Famine" published in *New Internationalist* also touches briefly on the upsurge in price drawing upon the findings of the historian Utsa Patnaik whose work reveals that the British economist John Maynard Keynes advocated for an indirect tax through deliberate inflationary policy because he knew that an already immiserated populace would riot if direct tax is levied on them. Hickel notes how Keynes economic policy affected price of goods:

> During the 1940s, the colonial government printed extraordinary amounts of money for military expenditure. All this new demand caused prices to soar, particularly for staple goods. The price of rice increased by 300 per cent. But because wages did not rise accordingly, ordinary people were pushed even deeper into poverty, forcing them to dramatically curtail their consumption of food and other goods. Meanwhile, any additional profits that fell into the laps of business owners as a result of the price inflation were taxed by the colonial state (58).

Keynes worked together with the then prime minister of Britain, Winston Churchill, who helped implement Keynes's economic policies. Evidently, the inflation was intentional because Keynes' policy was designed to "reduce the consumption of the poor" to provision "British and American troops" (58). In effect, food supplies of Bengal were directed to Allied military use. Even though the gravity of the famine was deplorable, with many officials pleading to Churchill to send aid, requests were dismissed. Instead, the British government continued the extraction of "as much as £15 billion ($20 billion), in today's money, from 1939 to 1944" for Britain's domestic spending (58). Hickel also highlights Patnaik's point that instead of extracting the colonial subjects'

resources, "the US and Britain could have used their own resources …which would have required taxing their own citizens at no more than £1 per person" (58).

In "Mobilizing the British Empire-The Bengal famine," English scholar Lizzie Collingham notes that when food scarcity was at its height, "at least 1.5 million Bengalis died during 1943 to 1944" but altogether, around "3 million people may have died in the famine" as a result of the famine alongside "epidemics of smallpox, cholera and a particularly nasty strain of malaria killing those weakened from malnutrition" (Collingham 2012, 142). Another thing that Collingham points out that is important to consider is that when famine victims started to pour into Calcutta, the British government was doing "everything they could to use wartime censorship to suppress the news of the famine" according to the findings of the British journalist Ian Stephens who was the editor of the Indian newspaper *The Statesman* (149). She highlights how hunger in the Bengal Famine of 1943 was not only caused by Allied mismanagement and neglect, but also the government of India was irresponsible and complacent in handling the problem of food supplies:

> The government of India, which was composed of Indian politicians as well as British officials under the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, showed a complacency towards the problem of wartime food supplies that was both irresponsible and callous. Once tragedy had struck in Bengal in 1943 Ian Stephens lambasted the government in an editorial for the Calcutta newspaper *The Statesman*: 'Blame for the extremely grave situation rests heavily on the Government of India. We find ourselves amazed by the lack of vision… in this vital matter. From the knowledge in their position risk of a food shortage and rocketing prices should have been discernable to an alert eye within their organization from the moment of Japan's belligerence…yet a full year was allowed to elapse before a Food Department at the center was even set up…[B]y mumbling that food shortage did not exist, they willed themselves into belief that the dread spectacle would vanish. (142-143)

This demonstrates that the government of the time was clearly negligent in handling and responding to the famine. There were attempts made to manipulate the availability of rice during the 1943 famine. The Famine Inquiry Commission, also known as the Woodhead Commission,

was a commission set up by the British government in India to investigate the Bengal Famine of 1943. However, the researcher Madhushree Mukherjee in her journal article "Bengal Famine of 1943: An Appraisal of the Famine Inquiry Commission," found that the reports published by the FIC cannot be trusted as the reports reveal serious omissions and altered or muddled figures. The Famine Commission reports were put together in a manner that was utilized by the British sought to avoid embarrassment due to its failure to address real reasons behind the man-made famine and to prevent any culpability imposed on the Bengal administration.

The article also explains the Famine Commission's claims that the "rice shortage was too small to be predictive of famine" as blatant oversimplification and misleading, as the *Nanavati Papers* highlight the unpublished transcripts of the Famine Inquiry Commission (Mukherjee 2014, 72). Essentially, Mukherjee argues that the FIC's findings were politically motivated, aiming to absolve blame from British policies and instead attribute the famine to natural causes and her analysis calls for a re-examination of the narrative (the claim that it was natural) surrounding the famine, stressing the need to consider systemic factors like accessibility to food. For reference, the FAD is an abbreviation of the Food Availability Decline, a term coined by the economist Amartya Sen that suggests famines occur only due to inadequate food supply, either because of reduced production or disruptions in distribution. Mukherjee also highlights that the members of the commission were ordered to destroy "their copies of unpublished transcripts [Nanavati Papers]" about the secret hearing of the FIC (72). It is unclear who or what entity exactly issued that order, but it can be deduced that there was a faction involved unwilling to disclose the contents of the unpublished transcripts.

Skyrocketing grain prices and hoarding were other factors that contributed to the exacerbation of the famine. *In Political Routes to Starvation: Why Does Famine Kill?*, Bas Dianda (2018) noted:

> More reasonable criticism concerns the British neglect of countering speculations, which during the famine were commonplace. Hoarding turned out to be a real plague but also panic buying contributed to aggravating food shortage. Dreading hunger, people began to stockpile unreasonable amounts of rice, reducing its availability on the market and easing the way for food prices to rocket. Between March and October 1943, the price of rice increased fourfold in Dacca. Price ceilings, which could have limited economic discrimination, was not in keeping with the British outlook; so, the rule limited itself to launch a strong reassuring campaign to discourage hoarding. The central government tried to convey the message that high food prices were unjustified taking into account the amount of staples available but the appeal did not produce significant effects and no further policies were implemented to secure equality of sacrifice. Direct and widespread controls on hoarding and profiteering were omitted, no rationing system was ever activated and aid reliefs were not distributed but for the very advanced stages of the famine. (179).

This further demonstrates that providing relief or aid was never a priority of the British government, even though they attempted to discourage hoarding. But I suspect that most of the hoarding was done by the British government itself, as they had to provision their troops during World War 2.

Data and Analysis

The sources surveyed for both famines are mostly history books and academic journals. The primary sources include John Fiske's *The Unseen World* (1904) and Sir William Hunter's *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1871). The aforementioned books served as invaluable primary sources because they are dense with firsthand accounts. For instance, in discussing the famine of 1770, both Fiske and Hunter incorporated Bishenpore district's native superintendent letter where he stated that the fields of rice had become" like fields of dried straw" (Fiske 1904, 192; Hunter 1871, 21). Another example of primary sources being utilized would be when Hunter quoted a letter from

the President and Council to the Court of Directors, dated Fort William, 30th September 1769 discussing the reasons behind high food prices not affecting the British government's system of collecting tax, “In the early part of 1769 high prices had ruled, owing to the partial failure of crops in 1768, but the scarcity had not been so severe as materially to affect the government rental” (Hunter 20). For the 1943 famine, the secondary source used in particular, Lizzie Collingham’s book chapter titled “Mobilizing the British Empire-The Bengal famine” where she draws the findings of a newspaper titled *The Statesman*. So even though Collingham’s book is not a primary source, it does consult a primary source which would be the aforementioned newspaper. Collingham also provides the death toll of the political famine which is over 3 million. Vinita Damodaran in “Famine in Bengal: A Comparison of the 1770 Famine in Bengal and the 1897 Famine in Chotanagpur” provides the death toll of the natural famine which is 10 million. The bulk of the evidence for both cases is from secondary sources.

Conclusion

Through my research, I have effectively demonstrated that the Bengal Famine of 1770 was natural, whereas the famine of 1943 was political even though both have occurred under British rule and had broader colonial implications. I will say, however, the natural famine of 1770 was aggravated by the British revenue collection system following the transfer of *diwani* rights, which levied exorbitant taxes on peasants living in a region that faced either too much rainfall or too little rainfall. If peasants are unable to cultivate crops, they wouldn’t be able to pay taxes which in turn would displace them from their abodes. Such uncertainties didn’t preclude the British government from extracting exorbitant amounts of tax from tenant cultivators, all of whom were poor peasants. I would still categorize the famine of 1770 as mostly natural because

of the agricultural instability caused by a variety of factors such as: excessive or inadequate rainfall, unusability of fields after the cultivation of rice or lack thereof.

Conversely, the Bengal Famine of 1943 is undoubtedly political because it wasn't natural in its inception, and more importantly, it was part of the greater WW2 Allied war efforts. As the British government diverted food towards Allied troops, they also simultaneously reduced the food availability to their Bengali colonial subjects by destroying means of transportation that would bring in food from Burma. Confiscation and destruction of boats in fear of a potential Japanese invasion disrupted local food distribution. Essentially, what makes the famine of 1943 more political is the fact that scorched earth strategies were utilized to preclude military invasion from an enemy army, but in effect also destroyed the means of sustenance for the rural populace. On the surface, it seemed like the scorched earth strategy saved India from Japanese invasion but in reality it disrupted the flow of food into Bengal and many rural peasants lost their means of livelihood. Another aspect that makes the famine political is the fact that efforts were taken to make sure the news of the famine was suppressed through censorship.

In both scenarios, the implications of the famines were always felt by the rural poor and their families first. As implied by my paper several times, the common denominator of both famines is that they occurred under the rule of the British, and in both cases, British negligence and complacency surrounding the handling of the famines and providing aid were paramount and obvious. Colonial extraction in the form of either collecting tax revenues or for Allied war efforts are key elements of British colonial rule. As the region of Bengal has always been susceptible to famines, it is no surprise that the 1770 famine is natural. Perhaps it is also a reason why it was so easy to dismiss the famine of 1943 as man-made as well even though it was clearly manufactured through a series of scorched earth policies to provision and advance Allied War efforts. Another

common denominator was the economic implications. During both famines, the price of grains skyrocketed, making it difficult for the rural populace to buy food for their sustenance.

I would also like to bring attention to Amartya Sen's "exchange entitlements" briefly. Even though in his seminal work *Poverty and Famines* he discussed exchange entitlements surrounding the Bengal Famine of 1943, I believe that it can be easily applicable to the Bengal Famine of 1770 as well. There are multiple reasons why loss of exchange entitlements applies to the famine of 1770. As Bengal suffered a major drought in 1769-70, leading to a failed rice harvest, the peasant cultivators could no longer cultivate crops and pay taxes to the zamindars who in turn were supposed to collect revenues for the British government. This also meant that the ryots or peasant cultivators were eventually displaced and lost their livelihood for their inability, leading to failure in exchange entitlements. This means these peasants can no longer afford food irrespective of availability because of loss of income. As the drought ruined harvests, farmers during the Bengal Famine of 1770 couldn't trade crops for food or for paying taxes, leaving them without any commodity to exchange.

Before researching the two famines for a case-based comparative analysis paper, I had a preconceived notion that political famines tend to be deadlier than natural famines. However, I quickly realized that it is not always applicable to all cases. The estimated death toll of the natural famine of 1770 is 10 million and the estimated death toll of the political famine of 1943 is over 3 million. This was a surprise to me because usually political famines are caused by government actions and military engineering through forced extraction or destruction of resources and other war-related disruptions. Initially, I was expecting the political famine of 1943 to have a higher death toll as opposed to the natural famine of 1770. All in all, both the natural famine and the political famine were handled poorly and if colonial administrators had taken

immediate measures to combat the famine with relief measures, the death tolls of both cases wouldn't have been as high as they were in their respective cases.

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A piece on Zachary Dangor's, a second-year at Bard College, experience at the REEESNe (Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies Northeast Network) student conference:

Zachary Dangor, a second-year student at Bard College pursuing a joint major in History and Prussian and Eurasian Studies, had the amazing opportunity of attending the REEESNe student conference. This conference, hosted at the University of Pittsburgh, brings together undergraduate and Master's-level students studying Russian, East European, & Eurasian Studies.[26] The event includes panels of student research papers, roundtables for presenting student experiences, and a panel with alumni who speak about how they have applied REEES expertise in a diversity of careers.[27] This conference is also held in collaboration between the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies, the European Studies Center, and the Graduate Organization for the Study of Europe and Central Asia and Yale University's Macmillan Center.[28] In order to learn more about Zachary's experience at the conference and his research interests, we sent him a series of written questions and he wrote back to us. These are included below:

What is your academic focus? What inspired your interest in these concepts?

My academic interests focus on Eastern European and Eurasian history, with a particular emphasis on the Russian Empire and the ways they aimed to integrate and control its diverse territories. I am especially interested in processes of Russification, being how the imperial government used language as well as educational and cultural policies to promote Russian identity and consolidate authority across the empire's many communities.

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[26]MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale, "REEESNe | 2025-26 REEESNe Student Conference." MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale, 2026 https://macmillan.yale.edu/europe/reeesne/events/2026-03-20/2025-26-reeesne-student-conference.
[27]MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale, "REEESNe | 2025-26 REEESNe Student Conference." MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale, 2026 https://macmillan.yale.edu/europe/reeesne/events/2026-03-20/2025-26-reeesne-student-conference.
[28] MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale, "REEESNe | 2025-26 REEESNe Student Conference." MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale, 2026 https://macmillan.yale.edu/europe/reeesne/events/2026-03-20/2025-26-reeesne-student-conference.

My interest in the region developed gradually. I have been drawn to history since high school but my interest in Eastern European studies developed in a more unexpected way. I am a longtime fan of hockey, and I initially wanted to learn Russian somewhat jokingly. I thought it would be fun if I could one day speak with Russian players should I have gotten the chance to meet them. However, when I began studying the language here at Bard, I began to appreciate it and became increasingly interested in the history and culture of the region. Learning Russian opened the door for me to explore Eastern European and Eurasian history more seriously and it led me to the academic focus I pursue today.

What research did you present at the REEESNe conference? What methodological tools did you use to engage in this research, or what was your research process like?

At the REEESNe student conference, I presented a paper where I examined the relationship between the Russian Empire and the Don Cossacks in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. My research focused on how the empire ruled over its frontier regions, particularly through what I describe as "structured differentiation." Instead of fully absorbing frontier communities into provincial administration, the imperial government often preserved certain local institutions and privileges as long as they served imperial interests. In the case of the Don Cossacks, their communal landholding and military traditions were maintained simply because they provided the empire with a reliable and highly effective cavalry force.

In terms of the research process, I relied mostly on secondary historical sources alongside some translated imperial legal documents. I spent a lot of time working through different perspectives among historians about how the Russian Empire managed its diverse territories and where the Cossacks fit into that broader imperial system. Engaging with these sources helped me think about the empire as a system that often relied on negotiated relationships with those frontier societies.

What led you to presenting at the REEESNe conference? How was your overall experience there? What was the conference like? What did you learn from the experience? What was it like to present your research in this way?

My journey to presenting at the REEESNe Conference began with a desire to engage with a broader academic community. The conference, hosted by the University of Pittsburgh, brought together students studying Russia, Eastern Europe, and Eurasia. Most presenters were master's students or recent graduates so as a sophomore I was one of the few undergraduates presenting. The conference was very welcoming and pushed me into a much bigger world of discussion and learning. Listening to other panels exposed me to new perspectives as well as new research and presentation approaches. It was exciting to see the range of topics students were exploring.

I would say that presenting my own research was challenging but very rewarding. Preparing for the presentation pushed me to clarify my ideas and communicate them a lot more clearly to an audience with whom I was not familiar. The Q&A section that followed was, in my opinion, one of the most valuable parts of the experience. My fellow presenters and other professors of the school had questions that encouraged me to think more about my argument and consider new angles for my research.

Overall, the conference gave me a glimpse into what academic conferences are like and gave me a chance to participate in a community of scholars who are very passionate about their research. As one of the few undergraduate presenters, I left the conference feeling quite encouraged to continue my research and more confident in my ability to contribute my opinion to academic discourse. The experience strengthened my interest in research and academia and showed me how valuable it can be to ask questions and learn from others in an academic environment.