THE GLOBALIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BUSINESS AND CONSUMER CULTURE

Workshop at the GHI Washington, February 24-25, 2012. Convener: Joshua Clark Davis (GHI). Participants: Davarian Baldwin (Trinity College), Enrico Beltramini (Notre Dame de Namur University), Hartmut Berghoff (GHI), Nemata Blyden (George Washington University), Douglas Bristol (University of Southern Mississippi), Ansgar Buschmann (University of Münster), Nathan Connolly (Johns Hopkins University), Tiffany Gill (University of Texas), Brenna Wynn Greer (Wellesley College), Oluwafemi Alexander Ladapo (University of Ibadan, Nigeria), Kip Lornell (George Washington University), Seth Markle (Trinity College), Celeste Day Moore (University of Chicago), Donna Murch (Rutgers), J. Griffith Rollefson (University of California, Berkeley), Fritz Schenker (University of Wisconsin), Suzanne Smith (George Mason University), David Suisman (University of Delaware), Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI), Juliet E.K. Walker (University of Texas).

To a large degree, historians have examined the globalization of U.S. business and consumer culture as the campaign of white American businesspeople to shape the world’s economies and market cultures into their own image. This workshop, however, moved beyond that narrow perspective and investigated the global dimension of African-American businesses and consumer cultures. This workshop was framed around the following questions. How have African Americans exported their products, goods and culture beyond U.S. borders? How have African-American businesses and consumer cultures, when exported abroad, shaped global perceptions both of black Americans, and of the United States more generally? Can exported African-American consumer cultures undermine, challenge and alter dominant conceptions of the American marketplace as the exclusive province of white elites? How did the civil rights and black power movements shape global markets for African American businesses and products? Just as important, what impacts have non-American businesses and products had on African-American consumer culture? In what ways have international businesses reinterpreted black consumer cultures for their own purposes, sometimes even importing those adaptations back into the United States?

Joshua Clark Davis introduced the workshop by tracing the history of businesses on 7th Street and Georgia Avenues in the District’s
Northwest quadrant, explaining how African American consumer culture has long been deeply global. Over the years African Americans along 7th Street and Georgia Avenue have conducted business with a wide variety of immigrants from eastern and central Europe, the Caribbean, east and west Africa, and Asia. Indeed, the very idea of what constitutes “black business” has changed over time, as black merchants on 7th Street and Georgia Avenue increasingly hail not only from America but also from such countries as Ethiopia, Senegal, Jamaica, and Trinidad. In addition, quite a few prominent black businesspeople with extensive global connections — including H. Naylor Fitzhugh, Sean “Puffy” Combs, and Ben Ali of Ben’s Chili Bowl — have attended Howard University, whose western border runs along Georgia Avenue.

In the first paper of the “African American Businesses and Africa” panel, “Black Business, Africa, and Global Capitalism: The African American Entrepreneurial One Percent,” Juliet E.K. Walker reflected on the historical profession’s changing approach to the topic of black business. Since she began her graduate studies in the early 1970s, when many historians challenged the very idea of African American businesses meriting scholarly consideration, Walker has been heartened to witness a marked increase of scholarly interest in African American enterprise. In her paper, Walker discussed how many leading black American entrepreneurs, from the nineteenth-century shipping magnate Paul Cuffee, to the first African American billionaire Reginald Lewis, to the Nigerian-born oil importer Kase Lawal, owe a tremendous share of their wealth to international business deals. The next paper, presented by Oluwafemi Alexander Ladapo, addressed the conundrum of Nigerian trade relations with African American firms. On the one hand, Nigerian youth have long embraced African American music, film, and television, as seen most clearly in the tremendous market for pirated media made in the U.S. Major white-owned companies, particularly in the oil business, also maintain a strong presence in the Nigerian economy. On the other hand, however, very few African American companies have yet to deeply penetrate Nigeria, the largest economy on the African continent. If African American entertainment firms, Ladapo argues, committed themselves to distributing their products in Nigeria, the country’s market for unlicensed media products would shrink significantly.

minister with a nationally-syndicated radio show on CBS, Michaux was both a religious leader and an intrepid global businessperson, distinguishing himself with economic goodwill trips to Haiti and even an aerial Bible drop over the Soviet Union. In “‘Africa Must be Seen to be Believed’: The Henderson Travel Agency and the Making of Black Global Citizens,” Tiffany Gill explored the fashion-designer-turned-travel-agent Freddye Henderson, who began organizing tours of black Americans visiting African countries in the 1950s and 1960s. Amid the civil rights struggles of the period, trips to newly decolonized African nations like Ghana and Nigeria offered African American tourists inspiring encounters with both their own ancestral heritage and with nascent projects in black national political independence. Donna Murch concluded the panel with her paper “Toward a Social History of Crack: Drugs, Informal Economy, and Youth Culture in an Era of Neoliberalism.” Murch examined the crack-cocaine economy of the 1980s and 1990s as an outgrowth of not only the massive deindustrialization and global outsourcing of factory jobs in urban American, but also the U.S.’s covert and over participation in the bloody civil wars and internal conflicts of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia.

The “Global Jazz Business at Mid-Century” panel opened with “Spinning Race: The Production and Promotion of African American Music in France, 1947-59,” Celeste Day Moore’s investigation of two postwar French record labels that specialized in jazz, Disques Vogue and Disques Barclay. The owners of these labels functioned as vital intermediaries between American musicians and French consumers, wielding enormous power in determining what was perceived as authentic jazz and genuine expressions of African American culture in France. Fritz Schenker followed with his paper “Music, Race, Consumption, and Empire: African American Musicians in Asia’s Jazz Age,” in which he traced the sizable market for jazz throughout the British, American, Japanese and Dutch Pacific empires of the 1920s and 1930s. Traveling African American musicians doubled as entrepreneurs, as they organized and booked their own performing tours throughout colonial Asia, yet local racial hierarchies still limited and restricted their economic and musical autonomy throughout the region.

Saturday began with the panel “The Transnational Hip Hop Economy,” and Seth Markle’s paper, “Youth Subversive Consumption: Preliminary Thoughts on the Politics of Travel, Appropriation, and
Aesthetics of Golden Era Hip Hop in Tanzania, 1985-1994.” In this paper, Markle analyzes the global commodification of hip hop not as a simple story of hegemonic Americanization, but rather one of cross-pollination within the African diaspora. Access to hip hop in Tanzania depended largely on one’s access to transnational trade networks, while numerous American hip hop artists of the late 1980s and early 1990s drew heavily on African, particularly Egyptian and Kiswahili, imagery and vocabulary. Ansgar Buschmann followed with “When Hip-Hop Blew Up Tommy Hilfiger: Globalization with the Help of African American Consumer Culture as Illustrated by the Case of the Tommy Hilfiger Corporation.” In this paper, Buschmann examines the curious trajectory of the white-owned apparel company Tommy Hilfigers. Considered the quintessential clothing line for African American hip-hop fans and artists in the late 1990s, after 2001 Tommy Hilfiger plummeted in popularity in the U.S. In the last decade, however, international demand, particularly in Europe, has kept the company afloat. J. Griffith Rollefson concluded the panel with “Le Cauchemar de la France: Blackara’s Postcolonial Hip Hop Critique in the City of Light,” in which he traces the complex interplay of attitudes towards capitalism, economic justice, and entrepreneurship in the music of French rap duo Blackara. The group prides themselves on their conquests in the multiple arenas of the marché noir, both the “black market” of illicit drug sales, as well as the business of selling “black” cultural commodities such as hip hop recordings. In celebrating these activities as the foundation for their economic advancement within French society, Blackara furthers a distinctly free-market logic, while also excoriating the neo-liberal policies of former president Nikolas Sarkozy.

With his paper “Exported Racism”: African American Consumerism, Black Sailors and the Cold War in Greece, 1972-74,” Douglas Bristol commenced the panel on “African American Consumers and Empire.” Bristol explained how Greek media coverage of racial violence between white and black U.S. naval members serving in Europe in the 1970s, combined with press coverage of the American Black Power Movement, motivated many Greek merchants to discriminate against black service personnel who tried to patronize their businesses. Thus, American economic racism was exported to the Mediterranean via the U.S. military and international media. Davarian Baldwin continued with “How Ya Gonna Keep ‘Em Down on the Farm, After They’ve Seen Paree?”: Thoughts on Black Consumer Culture and the Transnational Turn.” Baldwin argued that even in the early twentieth century, African
American entrepreneurs were using consumer capitalism outside the United States for the purposes of advancing Black political and intellectual interests. From the boxer Jack Johnson’s international celebrity to James Reese Europe’s massive success as a touring artist in—where else—Europe, the global marketplace beckoned black entrepreneurs seeking economic and cultural opportunities. Joshua Clark Davis concluded the panel with “The Musical Economy of African American Soldiers in Cold-War West Germany,” a discussion of the pivotal role black American servicemen played in transmitting funk music and hip hop culture into Cold War West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. Through record stores, American military stores and night clubs, as well as German discos, American soldiers of color forged bonds with each other and with curious West Germans, in turn laying the ground work for the widespread popularization of hip hop in post-unification Germany.

In the last panel of the workshop, “The Politics of Black Global Business,” Enrico Beltramini delivered the paper “The Globalization of Black Business: The Case of Jesse Jackson.” Beltramini examined the civil rights leader’s vital role as a broker and intermediary between African American business interests and foreign governments. As the most prominent proponent of “black capitalism” to emerge out of the civil rights movement, Jackson advocated a highly influential vision of African American economic progress in the U.S. and abroad through his leadership in projects like Operation Breadbasket and Operation PUSH. In the final paper of the workshop, “Selling Liberia: Moss H. Kendrix, the Liberian Centennial Commission, and the Post-World War II Trade in Black Progress,” Brenna Wynn Greer investigated the career of Moss Kendrix, an African American public relations man who planned a centennial celebration of Liberia that would promote the country to U.S. business interests. Although the planned exposition was ultimately cancelled, by the early 1950s Kendrix was hired by the Coca-Cola Company as their first consultant for the African American consumer market.

In conclusion, workshop participants agreed that much work remains to be done on this relatively new area of interest for historians. While topics like imperialism and the entertainment business were discussed at length, participants contended that the discussion could include a closer analysis of the relationship between black religion and global business, a consideration of the role of gender in African American entrepreneurship, and further exploration of global African
American consumer culture in the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries. In addition, much of the discussion at the workshop focused on African American businesses’ global dealings; but non-American companies’ dealings with African American consumers merit further consideration. Participants expressed satisfaction with the course the workshop had taken and looked forward to the project progressing, hopefully through the publication of an edited collection of essays.

Joshua Davis (GHI)