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The Black Plague?

FEB 2007

By [Alex Féthière](#)





Image by Gabriel Held

Drug use has been racialized for as long as there has been a communications industry. The choice and consumption of drugs can be rendered in demographics, but the slant given the figures paints a chilling portrait when one compares meth, represented as a “white” drug of choice, to crack, cast as a “black” drug of choice. One need only consider the images this past fall of evangelical figurehead Ted Haggard in his SUV, disavowing his sins of meth and men from behind a cordon of family flesh (then admitting to them by proxy from a podium), against last decade’s grainy surveillance footage of then DC-mayor Marion Barry smoking crack in a hotel room. Factor in each item’s respective broadcast frequency and venues to see the discrepancy writ large: to find the sordor on Haggard, you had to trawl the Internet at length, but only those who lived under a rock, as it were, missed the ritual national spanking of Barry beaming from every TV in the U.S.

In his essay “Nihilism in Black America,” Cornel West indicts the profit motive that drives the negative, stereotypical coverage of African-Americans in the U.S. media. West refers to the “complex set of interlocking enterprises that have a disproportionate amount of capital, power, and influence on how our society is run and our culture is shaped,” accusing them of contributing to the “shattering

of black civil society.” West is concerned with how these enterprises peddle materialism as a panacea. Meanwhile, in “Airing Dirty Laundry,” Ishmael Reed focuses on how media institutions slander African-Americans despite these same institutions’ pretensions of political correctness, an argument Reed supports with a slew of statistics. Both thinkers’ contentions become crystal clear, so to speak, when considering crystal meth and crack in the racialized lights of their coverage.

When we look back on the hysteria, the media narrative of crack was almost cartoonish. It clearly consigned the use of crack almost exclusively to poor urban blacks; though the epidemic obviously took its toll on the ghetto, the majority of crack users were, in fact, white. The caricature was also so pervasive that it leaked into the vernacular, where its stain persist to this day: I have heard hundreds of people say “_ was on crack” to describe frenetic and psychotic behavior, usually to elicit laughter from people who likely have never seen anyone on crack or been affected by it. I have yet to hear anyone say “_ was on meth,” my efforts to popularize it notwithstanding.

Media crack coverage also gave birth to a flailing, wild exaggeration that has yet to stop crying: the “crack baby”. A news search for this phrase yields more results than you can click a mouse at. But a 2003 letter to the *NY Times* signed by 27 U.S. and Canadian researchers begged the paper to stop using the term, saying “‘Crack baby’ is not a medical diagnosis but a media stereotype. Such pejorative stigmatization of children is not only scientifically inaccurate but also dangerous.” They added that research on child development and cocaine exposure continues to be contradictory. Ten years earlier, a similar letter from an Associate Professor of Pediatrics at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx had similarly scolded the *Times*: “...since the identification of early substance exposure is largely limited to the poor, nonwhite newborns in public hospitals, the use of drug exposure information to label these infants may increase their victimization by racial and social bias.” It seems the racialized trope of the inner-city black “crack baby” is a tar baby that our great newspaper of record can’t let go of...did I say “tar baby”?

The phrase “meth baby” does not exist on Lexis-Nexis. Searching for “meth” and “baby” brings a few hits, interestingly stories about children being found in raids on meth labs, not conjectures about the effects of meth use on infants in utero. Though meth has been a problem in this country for decades, there is a curious paucity of news coverage on the child development research that must be taking place. Research conclusions about fetal alcohol syndrome could make similarly sensational headlines and bear relevance to far wider audiences, but they might hit too close to the homes of target demographics. Claire Coles, a clinical psychologist at Emory University, said “It’s astonishing that so much has been said about [crack] cocaine when kids born with fetal alcohol syndrome are so much worse off.” I am not aware of any “lush baby” or “smash baby” catchy appellations assigned to such children, either – when reported, there seems to be little desire to “sex up” these story items.

This choice not to enhance the terms of the coverage reflects favoritism. “Even when the media does report stories of white violence the participants are often provided with excuses,” wrote Ishmael Reed. If this is true, then the absence of “meth baby” coverage seems downright sinister when you consider the attacks on the African-American family in hysterical headlines like “Crack Babies: The Worst Threat is Mom Herself,” screamed by the *Washington Post* in 1989. Covering fetal alcohol

syndrome without judgmental catchphrases like “welfare queen” provides excuses for the countless families ruined by alcohol. It also admits that the families can feel shame, and protects them accordingly. Suggesting that meth affects fetal development would attack white families nationwide in a style that the media has deployed only against blacks.

The limelight that fell on both drug narratives’ antiheroes is telling. In 1990, Marion Barry was arrested for crack possession in an FBI and D.C. police sting operation during the height of the nation’s crack obsession. The television news had a carnival with footage of the incident, during which Barry was immortalized in the phrase, “Goddamn setup...I’ll be goddamn...bitch set me up.” He was using drugs with a former girlfriend, and he spoke in exactly the way the news wanted to cast a man of his hue – behind that tie, he was apparently just another black urban crackhead, arrested with only the company of the woman who’d betrayed him. Contrast this with the image of Ted Haggard, former New Life pastor and spiritual leader of at least 14,000 people, a man who enjoyed weekly phone calls with George W. Bush. He had the benefit of making carefully-worded statements about his purchases – not to say use – of meth and male prostitutes, and this man of God didn’t use the Lord’s name in vain like Mr. Barry. Nor was he alone: in the aforementioned TV interview from the driver’s seat of his SUV, Haggard refused to step outside of the car and forced his wife and teenage children to hear the reporter’s questions about his drug purchases and sex transactions. Later, in resigning from his pastorate, Haggard admitted to “sexual immorality” and referred vaguely to parts of his life that were “repulsive and dark.” He hid behind a spokesman like he’d hidden behind his family, and the news let him. The image of Barry was everywhere, but you had to trawl the Internet to find one or two sites hosting clips of the audio in which the evangelical leader Haggard is trying to cajole his man-for-hire associate into selling him enough meth for Haggard’s whole family to go on a weeklong binge.

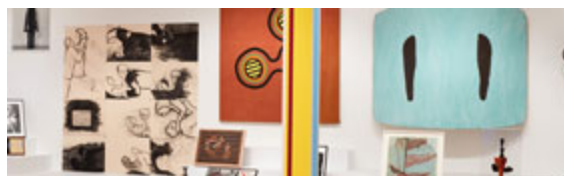
Atlanta Magistrate Judge B.J. Smith told a black defendant in 1993 that “Crack cocaine is going to do to your people what the KKK couldn’t do.” In light of persistent allegations that crack was introduced to the inner cities by CIA operations, this goes beyond insensitivity. There have been no allegations that the CIA flooded trailer parks with meth, and I doubt any judges allude to extermination when sentencing meth’s predominantly Caucasoid users. After a disinformation campaign that gave us “welfare queen” and “crack baby,” the de-emphasis of race and class when reporting on meth shows the poverty of the media’s integrity, not that of its subjects. It is, as Ishmael Reed contends, a response “typical of the way the media and other institutions deal with white pathology. Silence.”

CONTRIBUTOR

Alex Féthière

Féthière is a writer and senior editor of *Business Traveler* magazine.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape

By Cynthia Cruz

FEB 2020 | ARTSEEN

As Sillman explained in *Artforum*, much of what interested her “didn’t seem to rate in art history, to fit the correct teleology. Art historian friends who saw my list were like, ‘Who are all these people?’ I was like, ‘Are you kidding?’

Dear Friends and Readers,

By Phong Bui

JUL-AUG 2022 | CO-FOUNDER'S MESSAGE

In spite of the relentless and constant horrors that occur in our daily lives, both at home with the US Supreme Court officially reversing *Roe v. Wade*, ending the constitutional right to abortion, which had been upheld for nearly half century, and the ongoing sagas of public hearing by the House committee investigating the Capitol riot of January 6, 2021, seeking to lay bare the full magnitude of former president Donald J. Trump’s aggressive attempts to remain in power after the 2020 election, while abroad, members of the NATO military alliance welcomed Sweden and Finland to “accession protocols” as the Russia-Ukraine war in the outskirts of the Luhansk region intensifies, we have no choice but to re-ask ourselves what are the primary functions of liberal democracy’s two opposing parties, the party of liberty and the party of equality?

Isolde Brielmaier’s *I Am Sparkling: N.V. Parekh and His Portrait Studio Clients*

By Noa Wynn

SEPT 2022 | ART BOOKS

This book offers a counter-narrative to engaging with African photographic archives as well as photographic histories at large.

Challenging the history of canonizing and prioritizing photographers, Brielmaier instead shifts the focus to Parekh's sitters, particularly women, as a crucial part of the image itself.

Whitney Biennial 2022: *Quiet as It's Kept*

By Charles Schultz

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of the Whitney Biennial. The show spreads out across multiple floors, but it mainly takes place on two: one is designed like a labyrinth, the other as an open field. It's a dramatic shift. In the labyrinth your eyes can't travel far; in the open field there is almost nothing to stop them.