

# Character and . . .

# Play

Volume 9 / 2023

ANNALEE R. WARD *Character and Play: Worth Playing Together*

## Articles

MARY K. BRYANT *Gameplay and Human Flourishing*

KRISTEN EBY *Performance, Play, and Hospitality*

BRIAN HALLSTOOS *Defusing Racism: Olympian Sol Butler's  
Serious Playfulness*

ADAM J. KLEINSCHMIT *Transformative Discovery Science: Character  
and Play as Key Elements*

## Response

NAAMAN WOOD *Turning Poison into Medicine: Play and  
Decolonizing Our Future*



## Editors

Annalee R. Ward, Executive Editor

Mary K. Bryant, Managing Editor

*The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.*

---

## Contact Information

Wendt Center for Character Education

University of Dubuque

2000 University Avenue

Dubuque, IA 52001

563-589-3440 (office)

wendt@dbq.edu (e-mail)

[www.dbq.edu/wendt](http://www.dbq.edu/wendt) (website)

---

## Copyright Notice

Copyright ©2023 by the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque; all rights reserved. Brief portions of material in this publication may be copied and quoted without further permission with appropriate citation of the sources of the excerpt included in the copy. Copies may be made for classroom use if 1) the material is distributed without charge or fee above duplication costs; 2) the materials are photocopies, not reprints; 3) the material includes full bibliographic citation and the following statement: "Copyright by the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque. Reproduced by permission of the Wendt Center." This policy extends also to electronic copies or links posted in online course management or e-reserve systems. Please send notification of your use to wendt@dbq.edu. This statement serves as the Wendt Center for Character Education's official permission for using material under the conditions specified above.

---

The *Character and . . .* Journal is published by the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa, and uses short notes and bibliography in the style of the 17th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

# Defusing Racism

## Olympian Sol Butler's Serious Playfulness

---

Brian Hallstoos

### Abstract

*Playfulness can be serious business, as illustrated in century-old publications from the University of Dubuque. By engaging in “playful play,” Black student Sol Butler made friends and helped build a campus community that was less likely to express and tolerate anti-Black racism. Yet photographs and text also point to the limits of playfulness in combatting hate.*

---

The young women and men of the Philaphronia literary club gathered together on an early-January 1919 day in the commodious lobby of Severance Hall, a men’s dormitory at Dubuque College. Among the group’s members was Solomon “Sol” Butler, a world-class athlete and future Olympian who in a few months would become the first Black graduate of the eastern Iowa school along the Mississippi River.<sup>1</sup>



*Philaphronia Club (Sol appearing third from left, first row)*

He was the only Black student in the room—and on the whole campus, in fact. This was the organization’s first event in nearly a year. The Great War had recently ended, students had weathered the worst wave of a

devastating flu pandemic, and they now tried in earnest to rekindle the active campus life that had been put on hold during these times of crisis. Life for everyone had changed in the wake of numerous deaths, periods of isolation, and a fractured sense of safety. For African Americans, safety became increasingly tenuous over coming months as racial violence rose dramatically.

Reflecting both the growing momentum of the women's suffrage movement and the increasing presence of women on campus, the socially-engaged literary club focused attention on shifting gender roles. The central activity of the "jolly party"—which occurred in front of the fireplace and perhaps with the latest popular music wafting from the dorm's new phonograph player—involved testing the domestic skills of the male students, who would soon assume the "duty to be the home-makers" since "women were taking their place in the business world." Male students competed in button sewing and a recipe contest. Another male student "easily excelled Sol Butler in dishwashing."



*Sol in military uniform*



*Sol and fellow choir members sharing a joke*

Butler was the best football player and long jumper and fastest runner in the region—and for years he had assisted his father, Ben Butler Sr., back home in Kansas in his streetside service work—but he could not compete in the kitchen! The men reportedly performed most tasks poorly, a point highlighted in the yearbook account that was intended to magnify the light-hearted humor of the competition.<sup>2</sup>

Women and men had separate spheres—cooking, sewing, and cleaning versus working outside the home—the author implied, and it was funny to see one sex attempt to function in the other sex's sphere. In contrast, the story normalized the interracial nature of the event by not leading readers

to laugh at, deride, or even question the normality of a Black man having fun with white people. Many students supported the idea of women gaining the vote, which became reality the following year with the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

The playful spirit animating the pseudo-contest, which traded winning and losing for a shared nod to social change, helped all participants enjoy each other's company in spite of their different, even opposing attitudes regarding women's place in society. It also created an atmosphere that was nearly unheard of at that dangerous point in time where a Black man might exhibit his skills as a viable mate among attentive and unwed white women.


## Serious Playfulness

---

Like the ambitious women attending Dubuque College, who represented a small minority of the student body helping to bring gender inclusion to campus through their very presence, Sol Butler pushed the school to be racially inclusive by being present. It wasn't enough for him and other historically excluded students, however, to simply show up and blithely adapt to mainstream expectations or tolerate behavior, no matter how racist or sexist it got, for the sake of a college degree. They all recognized an opportunity at this culturally diverse institution to create meaningful social bonds. Co-educational playfulness in a dorm lobby served members of the literary club to strengthen these bonds by navigating new gender and racial realities together.

This spirit of play amid high-stakes social change is not a topic that historians frequently take up. I have spent nearly a decade researching, writing, and presenting on Sol Butler, but until recently had not thought deeply about the serious implications of his lighthearted moments.<sup>3</sup>

While previously assuming that Sol's experience with fun reflected his "serious" interactions in other realms, like on the sports field or in the classroom, I now believe his merry engagements helped create the conditions for success in these other realms. In this way, I take my cue from biologists Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin, who introduce the notion of "playful play," which is a type of play that "is accompanied by a particular positive mood state in which the individual is more inclined to behave (and, in the case of humans, think) in a spontaneous and flexible



*Butler was the best football player and long jumper and fastest runner in the region.*

way.”<sup>4</sup> This playful mood state, they argue, promotes creativity and can even lead to innovation. These innovations, which we may see in action in extant images of Butler, could even occur in the social realm and regarding otherwise stubborn and divisive race relations.

Butler appears to engage in playfulness—whether consciously or not—to defuse potential racial tensions and hostility. His fame rested on the amazing things he did in sports, like single-handedly winning team track and field meets and dominating in all aspects of football; yet his hopes for educational achievement and upward mobility rested on social skills and the things he did *off* the fields of play, activities that received much less attention than scoring a touchdown or winning a race. Not only did he make many friends, people respected him because of his leadership skills and strength of character. His courage, intelligence, strong work ethic, modesty, and wit made favorable and lasting impressions on his predominantly white teammates. I suggest playfulness helped those around him see these positive traits rather than defaulting to the era’s dehumanizing stereotypes of Black people and can be seen in the historic images.

## Playful Camaraderie

---



*Sol returning home from an away game with affectionate team members*

The warm feelings his classmates had for Sol may be seen in surviving images, like the photographic detail to the left from a school yearbook. Seen here shoulder-to-shoulder on the banks of the Mississippi River in fall 1916, Sol and his football teammates will soon board a steamboat for their return trip to their school. The night before, he led them in soundly defeating a Wisconsin opponent. Now they are all smiles and relaxation, enjoying

each other’s dapper company in their hats, suits and ties. His immediate neighbors warmly embrace him, their team leader, placing hands on his shoulder and arm. As we can see on his face, tilted up slightly and lit fully by the raking sunlight, he appears to feel safe and at ease in their company.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, his exceptional athletic talents helped make this moment possible. He ended up as a student in Dubuque and made this particular set of friends *because* he was an exceptional athlete—the country’s best in high school<sup>6</sup>—and had searched for a good place to further his schooling and amateur career. His athletic gifts opened up doors that would have remained closed no matter how socially skilled he may have been. In coming years, he would long jump in the Olympics, play in the NFL and on some of the best all-Black basketball teams, and become a sport celebrity, but not solely because he was a likable guy.

*Butler appears to engage in playfulness—whether consciously or not—to defuse potential racial tensions and hostility.*

But this 1916 photograph and many others taken during his college years suggest that something more than admiration and respect for his athletic talent is at play regarding his teammates’ embrace. The yearbook editor would not have fondly recalled Sol’s less-than-stellar dishwashing skills. In fact, he wouldn’t have been present to put these “skills” on display, if he had been anti-social, arrogant, cruel, or, most importantly considering the general racial climate, someone others viewed as socially beneath them.

### ***Pretend Pretensions***

Rather than beneath or above them, Sol was one of them. Sometimes he proved this by demonstrating who he was not. Take for example the two photographs below that come from an undated scrapbook (the image on the left) and the 1919 yearbook (on the right). In both we see Sol dressed well, like students often did back then for activities as seemingly mundane as



*Sol dressed as a "dandy"*



eating dinner or returning home from a distant sporting event. He has added one new item to his wardrobe, however, a monocle, which has transformed his demeanor.<sup>7</sup>

This visual prop, ostensibly used to enhance one's vision, serves a different purpose for Butler. Here his body language evokes the affectations of a pompous scholar or dandy. In the photograph with friends, he tilts his head to one side and, with eyes closed and a faint smile, gives the impression he is blissfully lost in thought. The other image finds him posing on the walkway up to the front door of Peters Commons, a building used then as it is today as a cafeteria. With imaginary lapels in hand and head tossed back, he looks full of himself, like a proud peacock on display. This is all in fun and he intends anything but to be taken seriously. Rather, he mocks pretensions and any haughty person who feels superior to others because of his social class, fancy dress, or intellectual achievement.

Through the dynamic interplay of gesture, posture, and facial expression we see Sol and his friends express their joy in being together (we also can imagine the photographer with Sol in front of the cafeteria laughingly egging him on). We see in their frenetic energy one source of their joy: the indulgence in a playful spirit. It is this spirit that Sol helped spark.

### ***Playfulness Builds Community***

We see this spirit on display again, a playfulness that strengthened interracial bonds, in a photograph of Sol with his track and field teammates. They pose once more in suits—did these college students ever dress down!—most of them on their bellies, for an informal shot on campus grass. The pixelated, somewhat blurry



*Track team playfully posing on campus grass*

image is a bit difficult to read. Does Sol rest his chin and cheek on his hand or is it a light-colored, collared shirt that helps frames his face? More vexing, are the two young men situated behind Sol resting their weight on him, perhaps even digging their elbows into his back like an annoying brother would do in order to get a reaction?<sup>8</sup>



While not everyone is smiling, judging by most countenances and the awkward pose, the dominant mood is one of playfulness. Rather than attempting to show dominance over Sol, the two comparably vertical and laughing men show affection toward their star teammate by, well, placing themselves as close to him as they can get, cramping his space. To my eyes and knowing what I know about how Sol brooked no disrespect from classmates, Sol appears pensive and patient rather than upset and would have pushed them off if they demonstrated something more threatening than goofy over-familiarity. In this instance, his mere presence has brought out some teammates' silly side.

*Play helps make character—whether good or bad—visible.*

In this loosely-staged photograph, which also includes two Latino runners, playfulness forms the backdrop against which we may see—or at least can imagine—the teammates' good character in the form of racially inclusive camaraderie. This and other images lead me to believe that good

character benefits from and, in some circumstances, may depend upon engaging in playful play or maintaining a playful spirit. As some researchers have concluded, playfulness is hardwired into us—and other members of the animal kingdom—to serve a function or functions that connect with communal well-being and, at times, survival.<sup>9</sup> Attending to the ethical implications of play, some play can, perhaps must, build community, while other forms of play or the lack of play can tear people down or exclude them from community.

Character development benefits from play because of the profound ways play and playfulness have shaped cultures across space and time. If, as theorist Johan Huizinga argues in *Homo Ludens*, play represents the origin of our communal rituals,<sup>10</sup> then understanding play may help us recognize what makes us more fully human and united in our shared humanity. Play helps make character—whether good or bad—visible. Perhaps no social reality makes this point more apparent than playful interactions involving people of different races.

Race is a social construct that ascribes inner meaning to people primarily based on perceived visual/exterior differences; what we see, according to the concept of race, sheds light on a person's more important qualities, like their character and capabilities, that are not visible. Given the by-design optical nature of race, the rituals on a college campus preserved in the visual record—like the coming together of teammates for a team photo—

represent key historical information on whether participants played nice and fair or not. In short and as my visual analyses imply, in old photographs we may see racism or anti-racism at play.

### ***Playfulness Prevents Prejudice***

At a time when segregation deeply impacted interracial interactions at virtually all other American colleges, Butler had a **relatively good experience** on the sports teams and campus.<sup>11</sup> Campus culture played an important role. Following the lead of his parents, who moved their family toward integrated opportunities, Sol chose a school where he would be well received and experience less xenophobia and racism at a time when Black migration and heavy European immigration warped attitudes across the country.

This unusual degree of cultural hospitality stemmed from the origins of the institution, which began as a school to train German-speaking Americans and, thirteen years before Sol arrived, expanded its mission to include the training of Christian leaders from around the planet.<sup>12</sup> By the time he and his brother Ben enrolled, Dubuque German College had students who identified as Bohemian, Cuban, Filipino, Hungarian, Korean, Mexican, Persian, Puerto Rican, Russian Jew, and Syrian. It ranked near the top in the country in the number of foreign-born students attending, despite its relatively small student body.<sup>13</sup> School leaders took seriously the notion that all Christians were of one blood and equal in the eyes of God, a reality that paved the way for Sol's meaningful inclusion.



*Excerpt from yearbook photo-collage page with team captains*

Consider for example a photo-collage page published in the 1918 Dubuque College yearbook, which, through two neighboring photographs, depicts Sol

in a formal and informal setting.<sup>14</sup> In the larger image on the left, we see him sitting on a neatly arranged row of chairs wearing his track and field jersey with the other team captains. They all stare out stone-faced at the viewer, evoking the toughness and seriousness expected of one in their leadership roles. Above their heads a yearbook editor has written their shortened first names.

To the immediate right of this photograph is another one that depicts Sol along with the football captain, Cornelius “Con” Hook. Here the two men wear relaxed smiles that correspond with their casual poses, lying in the grass on their sides, propped up on one elbow. The editor has written “Lazy Boobs”—a teasing, yet benign and now-antiquated expression (“boob” in this context meant “fool”)—over Sol’s head, commenting on their leisurely comportment. The two men show their playful side. The side-by-side images give a more complete sense of Sol and Con as athletes than either image would on its own. To play their respective sports well requires both steely-eyed determination along with the ability to decompress and enjoy another person’s company. A playful spirit at the right time helps maintain this healthy balance.

The editor’s two-word description of Sol and the football captain is remarkable given the era’s dominant racial ideologies. The term “lazy” had charged associations. Laziness was high on the list of character shortcomings used to justify the institution of slavery, perhaps America’s most destructive example of projection, where white slave owners freed themselves from having to labor by forcing it all on the backs of others. Slavery was good for the enslaved, the warped reasoning went, because it forced upon them a “civilizing” work ethic. At a time when most history books available to Sol and other students portrayed slavery as a relatively benign institution under which the races peacefully and happily coexisted, mass media and popular culture reinforced this stereotype by depicting Black people as inherently predisposed to avoiding work. This misrepresentation would have frustrated someone like Sol, whose hard-working father, Ben Sr., had been enslaved in Alabama for the first two decades of his life.

This pernicious idea of laziness did harm during Sol’s lifetime, one generation removed from slavery; it helped justify the blanket exclusion of Black people from most jobs, social services, and civic opportunities, as well as their over-incarceration, often on charges of vagrancy, idleness, and the like. Such justifications spoke to the evils of white supremacy and systemic poverty more than individual character flaws.<sup>15</sup> In stark contrast, the person who wrote the words “Lazy Boobs” on the photo does not appear to tap into

racist ideas about laziness that undergirded inequality. We are not supposed to see Sol as lazy because he is Black; we're not even supposed to view either man as truly lazy, knowing that they are the captains of the vaunted sports teams. Rather, the brief description simply highlights that this is the two men's downtime and, like any other well-adjusted and valued members of their campus community, they know how, stretched out on the grass together, to relax and be playful.

## The Limits of Playful Play

---

During the Jim Crow era, Black people drew upon numerous strategies to make a place for themselves in society. Carefully used, playfulness had the power to disrupt some people's racism or misogyny, allowing friendships to blossom and community to build. Certainly, however, in many situations the spirit of playfulness would not alight in the hearts and minds of those incessantly wed to their hatreds.



*Sol performing with minstrel troupe*



Furthermore, playfulness had the potential to sabotage meaningful friendships and community; it could make things worse for Black people by affirming stereotypes. Among the hundreds of yearbook snapshots taken during Sol's time at Dubuque College are two that show him participating in a cultural practice with deep American roots: blackface minstrelsy.<sup>16</sup> His presence complicates interpretations of these productions, which without him might more unequivocally register as an expression of anti-Blackness.


Around the time that Sol's dad was born into bondage on a southern plantation, white men in the urban northeast began pretending to be enslaved Black men on theater stages. They claimed to portray authentic portraits of plantation life, creating laughter in the process of spreading distorted images of blackness. Singing and dancing in ragged clothing, making ridiculous verbal errors, and projecting a carefree, irresponsible,

and dimwitted image, minstrel performers represented the antithesis of respectability.

Individual minstrels gave way to minstrel troupes that toured the country—mostly in the North—and then other parts of the world. Blackface minstrelsy became America’s first and most pervasive form of popular culture, shaping attitudes about race through wildly disrespectful misrepresentation.<sup>17</sup> This history helps clarify why many students at the University of Dubuque (Dubuque College was renamed after 1920) felt hurt, angry, and unsafe after two white, female students donned blackface, the first of two recent anti-Black incidences on campus that attracted public notoriety and confronted the community with the stubborn legacy of white supremacy.<sup>18</sup>

In both yearbook photos we see Sol sitting among white teammates who have applied a blackening agent (either greasepaint or burnt cork) on their faces and hands. True to the long-established conventions, they have intentionally left skin exposed around their mouths and eyes to suggest exaggerated lips and bulging eyeballs.

The poor quality of the reproduced image makes it difficult to determine if Sol dons any makeup. One of the five white minstrels, with cane, top hat, and no blackening agent, serves as the interlocutor, the one who hosts the event and announces each act. Their shows likely included monologues, music, and dancing. Highlighting the obvious, someone has written “min-strels” across the bottom of one photo. The other photo contains a derogatory term, akin to the n-word, for Black people and blackface performers.



*Playfulness had the potential . . . to make things worse for Black people by affirming stereotypes.*

### ***Who’s Playing?***

These minstrelsy photographs likely document the Halloween fundraiser that aimed “to defray the expense of tennis courts which are to be built just south of the McCormick Gymnasium,” where the event took place. At least one of these photographs was taken someplace other than the gym, illustrating the observation that “the amusement created did not cease with the conclusion of the program.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the “amusement” did not cease, and everywhere one looked—for instance at the cartoons and advertisements of traveling performers in local newspapers—was evidence of blackface and its cultural impact. The form was as commonplace as our current televised comedy acts or community talent and variety shows. Take

for example what my now-deceased, white grandmother wrote down on growing up in Tennessee around the time Butler was in Dubuque:

The school put on a minstrel show with two of the boys dressed like black men and had their faces and hands blacked and imitating the black manner of speaking and making jokes. This was very popular at the time and people enjoyed it greatly, never seeming to think of its hurting the black people's feelings. Actually there were very few, if any, black people in that community. I never remember seeing a black person while we lived there.<sup>20</sup>

My grandmother, who wrote this decades ago, implied that the practice was hurtful, even though white participants and audiences—including herself as a grade schooler—failed to acknowledge this. She also pointed out that minstrelsy often appeared in communities with few if any Black people, whose presence might have offered an undistorted perspective on blackness. In performing blackface with white classmates, like he would again in his senior year of college,<sup>21</sup> Butler asserted some degree of control over this ubiquitous and playfully harmful cultural form.

These college performances differed from those Sol performed in high school. In Hutchinson, Kansas, he shared the stage with other Black performers who performed for largely African American audiences. The scant information on these earlier shows reveal that audiences enjoyed the humor and musical beauty; as a local newspaper wrote about one production, “the big crowd was convulsed in laughter or soothed by the harmony of the colored minstrel men.”<sup>22</sup> Journalists also commented on the skill of the dancers. Rather than offering dehumanizing commentary about the characters the performers played, the media remained focused on the quality of the various performances.<sup>23</sup>

Black minstrel troupes had performed across the country for decades, adopting the era's dominant theatrical form and transforming it to serve new purposes. While not all African Americans condoned blackface minstrelsy—for instance, abolitionist Frederick Douglass vociferously objected to it<sup>24</sup>—many viewed it as a form that had subversive potential; when performed by Black performers (most notably the towering comedian Bert Williams) for Black audiences, the entertainment value, full of culturally-specific social commentary, might supersede the anti-Black and dehumanizing elements.<sup>25</sup>

In Dubuque, however, Butler performed for a non-Black audience and with an otherwise all-white cast; rather than being transformed, the barely interracial group's messaging likely aligned more closely with that of mainstream, all-white troupes. A few years later in the 1920s at the nearby University of Wisconsin in Madison, blackface minstrelsy represented the cultural expression of an emboldened anti-Black racism that saw the rise of an [on-campus Ku Klux Klan](#) organization and racist hostility.<sup>26</sup> Fortunately for Dubuque College, no hate group found administrative and student body support, but the school was not immune to racist attitudes.

### ***Violent Play***

Butler encountered potentially harmful playfulness again in the context of a campus-specific ritual, the freshmen abduction of seniors. In the image to the right, we see him sitting next to a classmate.<sup>27</sup> Both appear to be smiling and at ease while perched on a wagon, a 1919 precursor to the now-classic red Radio Flyer. Just like adults choosing to share a kids' wagon today, the young men exhibit a silly side by squeezing next to each other in the toy-like vehicle. In this deceptively innocent and playful moment, a chain dangles between Sol's two boots that have been manacled together; he is the target of abduction. Is the man sharing the wagon a rescuer?



*Senior kidnap*

According to most sources describing this specific ritual abduction, events got a bit out of hand, yet Sol's loyal friends out-maneuvered the freshmen abductors and helped him get a degree of playfully rough retribution. The day began with around six men holding Sol down, tying up his arms, placing his legs in shackles, gagging him, and driving him to another town. True to the tradition, college sophomores then tracked down and liberated Sol and the other senior captives, driving them to an annual school banquet. They also tossed several abductors into a pond and required one of them to walk several miles back home wearing only his underwear. The other wet freshmen hitched a ride on a freight train.<sup>28</sup>

A final account of events, printed two years after Sol graduated, suggested that concern remained over how the freshmen had treated their lone Black captive. One of the abductors took pains to show that he and others treated him well, noting that they provided him breakfast at a hotel and inviting

readers to “see how well Sol was enjoying himself” in the accompanying photographs. The author then revealed that this good behavior did not reflect their desires:

You see Sol was set to sail for France, to represent our school at the Army Meet, so we Freshmen solemnly promised ourselves that we would not injure Sol in any way. Me thinks, had it not been for this promise Sol’s physiognomy would not have been one to present at a Junior-Senior banquet.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, this former abductor, now junior class historian revealed that he and his classmates would have beaten Sol up if not for the fact that he was on the verge of representing the United States in a prestigious international sports event. Such an implied threat is especially chilling considering the anti-Black racial climate.

Many books have been written about white people killing Black people and destroying African American communities in this precise post-World War I era. For instance, many hundreds of Black people were killed by mob lynching and in racial massacres like the ones in [Chicago](#), [Tulsa](#), and [Elaine, Arkansas](#). We cannot know the exact numbers of the murdered because many—perhaps most—bodies of the victims, largely poor and undocumented in life, were buried in unmarked and sometimes mass graves.<sup>30</sup> The use of shackles on Sol, whose dad was born into chattel slavery, further emphasized that the abductors were not engaged in innocent play.

## **Still Playing**

---

Much has changed for the good in terms of race relations since Butler graduated from Dubuque College. We no longer live in an era of legal segregation where state and federal governments participate in forced racial separation and ignore passionate, well-organized pleas for anti-lynching legislation.<sup>31</sup> At least according to law, Black people now may travel, eat, sleep, shop, live, and work where they wish and marry whom they wish, without the presence or absence of laws impeding their civil rights. While not unheard of during Butler’s lifetime, interracial families like my own were rare and much less likely to meet benign indifference; a more common outcome then was societal ostracism, alienation, and discrimination.


Yet Black people today, as well as other people of color, still face greater hurdles in realizing their American Dream because we as a nation have a long way to go toward righting the wrongs of white supremacy and systemic



racism. Compared to white citizens, Black Americans are much less likely to own a home, amass wealth to pass down, and survive to a ripe old age; equally tragic, they are dispiritingly more likely to be incarcerated, given the death penalty, and murdered.<sup>32</sup> The ever-growing list of those murdered by police—including Laquan McDonald, Tanisha Anderson, Dontre Hamilton, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, and George Floyd, among others in the Midwest—is one of the more visceral pieces of evidence that Black lives are valued as less important than white lives. Racist ideologies (i.e. sets of related hateful ideas) still fuel injustice everywhere.

The history of Butler’s alma mater reminds us that we do not have to accept this injustice as out of our control. Historian Richard Breaux concludes that the University of Dubuque, as Dubuque College is now known, “fell on and ahead of the curve of African American inclusion and equality in campus life” over the past century.<sup>33</sup> With some exceptions, Black alumni from different generations support this assessment and point to a pattern set by administrators, coaches, and faculty of nurturing inclusivity.<sup>34</sup> In ways both subtle and bold, members of the college community have rejected manifestations of hate and worked to build a supportive interracial campus. We all may benefit from the diversity such sustained and inspired efforts have made possible.

Noble and effective past actions, however, cannot represent the university’s missional commitment to “a diverse and equitable community where Christian love is valued.” We who compose this community may demonstrate this commitment only through future action, sustained nurture and care. My teaching follows from the premise that understanding the challenges of the past—in particular those that divide the human family—increases our ability to navigate such challenges today and mitigate their harm moving forward.



*We do not have to accept this injustice as out of our control.*

Courageous historical actors like Butler, who have pushed against oppressive social forces, provide my students vivid illustrations of how one person can create positive and meaningful social change. This is a serious point, one that I now see evoked beyond the narrative details in a book or from my lecturing lips. Picture this: a thoroughly multiracial room of a dozen or so students acting a little silly, engaged in a laughter that pulls them together and motivates their learning about something soberingly serious; you choose the topic. This is the gift, a special, collectively-shared form of human

agency that was modeled so well, set in motion at Dubuque College over a century ago.

Sol Butler played a crucial role in creating a university climate that embraced diversity and shunned intolerance. His example of a playful spirit helped make such a climate possible and is worth emulating today. He reminds all of us that the serious work of defusing racism may at times be fun.



*Team playfulness while traveling for an away game*

---

*Brian Hallstoos is Associate Professor of History at the University of Dubuque, where he has taught courses on non-western world civilizations, African American history, and issues of race since 2012. He has published essays on musicians and cultural leaders and nears completion on a biography entitled Jumping Past Jim Crow: The Mobile Life of Black Sport Entrepreneur Sol Butler. Brian enjoys singing, walking, and spending time with his spouse Sharon and their children Tatum, Elise, and Joplin.*

## Image Credits

---

- p. 57: "Philaphronia Society," *The Key 1920*, p. 72
- p. 58: (Sol Butler in military uniform) Brian Hallstoos' personal collection
- p. 58: "College Chorus," *The 1920 Clavis*, p. 92
- p. 60: "Homeward Bound," *The 1917 Key*, p. 96
- p. 61: (Group photo with Sol Butler in a monacle) Student scrapbook in UD archive
- p. 61: (Solo photo with Sol Butler in a monacle) *The 1920 Clavis*, p. 156
- p. 62: (Track team posed on the grass) *The 1919 Key*, p. 170
- p. 64: (Team captains) and "Lazy Boobs," *The 1918 Key*, p. 125
- p. 66: (Minstrels onstage) *The 1918 Key*, p. 121
- p. 66: "Min-strels" *The 1918 Key*, p. 132
- p. 69: (Senior kidnap) *The Key (1921)*, p. 139
- p. 72: (Team at a train station) *The Key (1921)*, p. 154

## Notes

---

1. Sol's brother, Ben Jr., had left the college after their junior year.
2. Laird, *The 1920 Clavis*, 104–5.
3. See my forthcoming book, *Jumping Past Jim Crow: The Mobile Life of Black Sport Entrepreneur Sol Butler*.
4. Bateson and Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity and Innovation*, 13.
5. *The 1917 Key*, 96.
6. Butler was inducted into the inaugural class of the National High School Track and Field Hall of Fame. See National High School Track and Field Hall of Fame.
7. Untitled Student Scrapbook; Laird, *The 1920 Clavis*, 156.
8. Laird, Sisler, and Albrecht, *The 1919 Key: A Motion Picture of the Life and Customs of Dubuque College*, 170.
9. Bateson and Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity and Innovation*, 18, 33–39.
10. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 5, 15–17.
11. For perspective on his social experience compared to that of his African American friend Paul Robeson, see my one-act play *Sol and Paul* (2015) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kIDI2PK9yk> and my poster session at the American Historical Association (2014) at <https://aha.confex.com/aha/2014/webprogram/Paper14406.html> and at <https://digitalud-dev.dbq.edu/omeka/files/original/0c605b45ac5a87282b41f9cec51f286f.pdf>.
12. Mihelic, *A Survey*, 17–25; Straatmeyer, *Child of the Church*, 4–5, 48–50.
13. Steffens, “The Genius of Dubuque,” 3.
14. *The 1918 Key*, 125.
15. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*; Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery*; Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, chap. 1; Taylor et al., “The Historical Perspectives of Stereotypes on African-American Males.”
16. *The 1918 Key*, 121, 132.
17. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*; Johnson, *Burnt Cork*; Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, *Inside the Minstrel Mask*; Thelwell, *Exporting Jim Crow*.
18. Associated Press, “Dubuque Students Apologize”; Myers, “Students Outraged.”
19. “The Dubuque Student,” 15.
20. Baggett Cox, “Childhood Memories.”
21. Laird, *The 1920 Clavis*, 102–3.
22. “Minstrels Made Hit,” 9.
23. “Just Like Real Thing,” 10; “For Benefit of Church,” 10.
24. Neklason, “Blackface Was Never Harmless.”
25. Chude-Sokei, *The Last “Darky.”*
26. Messer-Kruse, “The Campus Klan.”
27. *The Key (1921)*, 139.
28. “May 27, 1919”; “Butler Rescued”; “‘Sol’ Is Wearing a Wide Grin.”
29. *The Key (1922)*, 47.
30. Here are just a few sources on just these three of many more instances of racial violence during these years: McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919*

and the Awakening of Black America; Sandburg, *The Chicago Race Riots, July, 1919*; Madigan, *The Burning: The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921*; Ellsworth, *The Ground Breaking: The Tulsa Race Massacre and an American City's Search for Justice*; Stockly, *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919*; Lancaster, ed., *The Elaine Massacre and Arkansas: A Century of Atrocity and Resistance, 1819-1919*.

31. Masur, "Why It Took a Century to Pass an Anti-Lynching Law."

32. Here are a few excellent sources that speak to the racial gulf maintained by systemic racism: Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*; Baradaran, *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap*; Benjamins and De Maio, eds., *Unequal Cities: Structural Racism and the Death Gap in America's Largest Cities*; Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*; Stephenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*; Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*.

33. Breaux, "On, Behind, and Ahead of the Curve," 17.

34. Hallstoos and Helmke, *Ahead of the Curve*, 24–93.

## Bibliography

---

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2012.

Associated Press. "Dubuque Students Apologize for Photo of Them in Blackface." *Washington Times*, March 2, 2017. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/mar/2/dubuque-students-apologize-for-photo-featuring-bla/>.

Baggett Cox, Flora. "Childhood Memories of Flora Baggett Cox." Transcribed by Edwin Cox (author's maternal uncle), Undated.

Baradaran, Mehrsa. *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019.

Bateson, Patrick, and Paul Martin. *Play, Playfulness, Creativity and Innovation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Bean, Annemarie, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds. *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996.

Benjamins, Maureen R., and Fernando G. De Maio. *Unequal Cities: Structural Racism and the Death Gap in America's Largest Cities*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021.

Blackmon, Douglas A. *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.

- Breaux, Richard. "On, Behind, and Ahead of the Curve: The African American Presence at UD and In Iowa." In *Ahead of the Curve: The First Century of African American Experiences at the University of Dubuque*, edited by Brian Hallstoos and Jon Helmke, 14–22. Dubuque: University of Dubuque, 2015. <http://archive.org/details/aheadofthecurve>.
- "Chicago 1919: Confronting the Race Riots." Accessed July 7, 2023. <https://chicago1919.org/>.
- Chude-Sokei, Louis. *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-On-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- The Dubuque Student*, November 1916. University of Dubuque Archive.
- Ellsworth, Scott. *The Ground Breaking: The Tulsa Race Massacre and an American City's Search for Justice*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2022.
- Encyclopedia of Arkansas. "Elaine Massacre of 1919." Accessed July 7, 2023. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/elaine-massacre-of-1919-1102/>.
- "For Benefit of Church." *Hutchinson News*, December 23, 1912.
- Hallstoos, Brian. "Gridirony: Segregated Stardom (128th Annual Meeting)." Washington, DC, 2014. <https://aha.confex.com/aha/2014/webprogram/Paper14406.html>, <https://digitalud-dev.dbq.edu/omeka/files/original/0c605b45ac5a87282b41f9cec51f286f.pdf>.
- . *Sol and Paul*. University of Dubuque, April 4, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kIDI2PK9yk>.
- Hallstoos, Brian, and Jon Helmke, eds. *Ahead of the Curve: The First Century of African American Experiences at the University of Dubuque*. Dubuque: University of Dubuque, 2015. <http://archive.org/details/aheadofthecurve>.
- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016.
- Johnson, Stephen, ed. *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.
- "Just Like Real Thing." *Hutchinson News*, January 9, 1913.
- The Key: Year Book of the Class of 1921*. Dubuque, IA: University of Dubuque, 1921. <https://archive.org/details/key19211921unse>.
- The Key: Year Book of the Class of 1922*. Dubuque, IA: University of Dubuque, 1922. <https://archive.org/details/key19221922unse>.

- “Klu Klux Klan.” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 77, no. 1 (1993): 2. <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/wmh/id/39106>.
- Laird, Donald A., ed. *The 1920 Clavis: A Pictorial Revue of the Student Life at Dubuque College during the Academic Year 1918-1919*. Dubuque, IA: Dubuque College, 1919. <https://archive.org/details/clavis19201920unse>.
- Laird, Donald A., George F. Sisler, and William F. Albrecht, eds. *The 1919 Key: A Motion Picture of the Life and Customs of Dubuque College*. Dubuque, IA: Dubuque College, 1919. <https://archive.org/details/key19191919unse>.
- Lancaster, Guy, ed. *The Elaine Massacre and Arkansas: A Century of Atrocity and Resistance, 1819-1919*. Little Rock: Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, 2018.
- Madigan, Tim. *The Burning: The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2013.
- Mahar, William J. *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999.
- Masur, Louis P. “Why It Took a Century to Pass an Anti-Lynching Law.” *Washington Post*, December 28, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/12/28/why-it-took-century-pass-an-anti-lynching-law/>.
- “May 27, 1919.” In *The Clavis*, 139–40. Dubuque, IA: University of Dubuque, 1920.
- McWhirter, Cameron. *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2012.
- Messer-Kruse, Timothy. “The Campus Klan of the University of Wisconsin: Tacit and Active Support of the Ku Klux Klan in a Culture of Intolerance.” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 77, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 2–38.
- Mihelic, Joseph L. *A Survey of the History of the University of Dubuque 1846-1979*. Dubuque, IA: University of Dubuque, 1979.
- “Minstrels Made Hit.” *Hutchinson News*, March 5, 1913.
- Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019.
- Myers, Samantha. “Students Outraged after Three ‘Racist’ Snapchat Posts Surface.” *KCRG*, February 3, 2018, sec. Eastern Iowa. <https://www.kcrg.com/content/news/Students-outraged-after-three-racist-Snapchat-posts-surface-472558373.html>.
- National High School Track and Field Hall of Fame. “Sol Butler.” Accessed December 12, 2022. <https://nationalhighschooltrackandfieldhof.org/showcase/sol-butler/>.

Neklason, Annika. "Blackface Was Never Harmless." *The Atlantic*, February 16, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/02/legacy-blackface-ralph-northam-didnt-understand/582733/>.

*The 1917 Key: The Year Book Published by Junior Class of Dubuque College*. Dubuque: Dubuque College, 1917. <https://archive.org/details/key19171917unse>.

*The 1918 Key: The Year Book Published by Junior Class of Dubuque College*. Dubuque: Dubuque College, 1918. <https://archive.org/details/key19181918unse>.

Oshinsky, David M. *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. New York: Free Press, 1997.

Parshina-Kottas, Yuliya, Anjali Singhvi, Audra D. S. Burch, Troy Griggs, Mika Gröndahl, Lingdong Huang, Tim Wallace, Jeremy White, and Josh Williams. "What the Tulsa Race Massacre Destroyed." *The New York Times*, May 24, 2021, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/24/us/tulsa-race-massacre.html>.

Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. New York, NY: Norton, 2018.

Sandburg, Carl. *The Chicago Race Riots, July, 1919*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1919.

Steffens, Cornelius. "The Genius of Dubuque." *Dubuque Evangelist*, August 6, 1917.

Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York, NY: One World, 2015.

Stockly, Grif. *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001.

Straatmeyer, Alvin J. *Child of the Church: University of Dubuque, 1852-2008*. Edited by Joel L. Samuels. Cedar Rapids, IA: WDG Communications, 2008.

Taylor, Evi, Patricia Guy-Walls, Patricia Wilkerson, and Rejoice Addae. "The Historical Perspectives of Stereotypes on African-American Males." *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 4, no. 3 (September 1, 2019): 213–25. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-019-00096-y>.

*Telegraph-Herald*. "Butler Rescued, Attends Banquet." May 28, 1919.

*Telegraph-Herald*. "'Sol' Is Wearing a Wide Grin; He May Go to Paris." May 28, 1919.

Thelwell, Chinua. *Exporting Jim Crow: Blackface Minstrelsy in South Africa and Beyond*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020.

Untitled Student Scrapbook, Date unknown. University of Dubuque Archive.

