Spectacle and Spectatorship at the Nineteenth-Century American Racetrack

Natalie Zacek

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15371>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.15371

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Natalie Zacek, "Spectacle and Spectatorship at the Nineteenth-Century American Racetrack", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 14-4 | 2019, Online since 11 December 2019, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15371> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.15371>

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

Spectacle and Spectatorship at the Nineteenth-Century American Racetrack

Natalie Zacek

- 1 Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, the sports journalist Charles Trevathan waxed nostalgic about the American racetrack culture of five decades earlier. At that time, he asserted, his fellow countrymen had such a passion for the turf that the sport's champions were national celebrities; referring to Lexington, an equine hero of the 1850s, he claimed that the animal's renown was not limited to "the sunny South," where he had been bred, trained, and raced, but extended "far up into the North, even into parts where the race-horse was not known." This horse, he stated, "belonged not alone to the turfmen. He was the heritage of the nation," to such an extent that, for many years after the horse's career had reached its conclusion, "any little child of America could have told you the story of Lexington."¹ Ten thousand people—nearly a tenth of the city's population—were present at New Orleans' Metairie track in 1854 for his rematch against his great rival Lecomte, but the lure of the racetrack extended back into the early national era, and forward beyond the end of the Civil War. Each of the "Great Match Races" between Northern and Southern champions, held at Long Island's Union Course between 1823 and 1845, attracted between fifty and one hundred thousand attendees, and within a few months of the Civil War's end former Confederates were willing to make the long journey to Saratoga Springs, New York and stand by men who had recently been their opponents, "side-by-side on the race-course," to "enthusiastically applaud the silken-coated thoroughbreds."² Even an ordinary day at a major antebellum race meeting could easily attract an audience of several thousand, and in the early years of American independence, Congress frequently recessed for the duration of the racing season in and around Washington, D.C.
- 2 These examples attest to the enthusiasm that many nineteenth-century Americans felt for racing, and while some experienced these competitions only vicariously, through

the pages of periodicals such as New York's *American Turf Register* and Baltimore's *Spirit of the Times*, a significant number made their way to the nation's racetracks, whether these were luxuriously appointed courses such as the Metairie Association in New Orleans and the Washington Course in Charleston, at which the nation's equine champions competed, or the numerous informal "race paths" which existed throughout Tidewater and Southside Virginia. The fascination with equine matters did not dissipate away from the track. Philip Vickers Fithian, a Princeton graduate who spent several years just before the American Revolution as tutor to the children of the leading Virginia planter Robert Carter III, was amused when, at a social gathering, he observed members of the local gentry engaging in "loud disputes concerning the Excellence of each others [sic] Colts—Concerning their Fathers, Mothers, Brothers, Sisters, Uncles, Aunts, Nephews, Nieces, & Cousins to the fourth Degree."³ These late eighteenth-century Tidewater planters were not unique in their desire to display and augment their knowledge of the pedigrees and qualities of individual thoroughbred horses; in the early decades of the nineteenth century, American turfmen clamoured for the creation of an equivalent of the English Jockey Club's General Stud Book, although this goal was not achieved until the 1860s.⁴ In-depth engagement with the achievements and backgrounds of the leading race-horses of the day was an indication not only of a man's knowledge, but of his membership in a national fellowship of genteel masculine sociability.⁵ Such knowledge, however, was easily acquired only by leisured gentlemen, and was thus largely inaccessible to many of the men and nearly all of the women who made their way to the nation's racetracks.

- 3 Awareness of the turf career of a particular horse, and of those of its antecedents, was a significant advantage with regard to betting on a race's outcome, but in the antebellum United States, and especially in the southern states, in which American racing centered in the decades between the end of the Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War, many of the most passionate supporters of the turf expressed great concern about trackside gambling. The South Carolina planter Joseph Alston wrote to his fiancée Theodosia, the daughter of Aaron Burr, that gambling, "so far from being a fashionable vice, is confined entirely to the lower class of people; among gentlemen it is deemed disgraceful. Many of them, it is true, are fond of the turf, but they pursue the sports of it merely as an amusement and recreation, not a business."⁶ Virginian politician John Randolph of Roanoke, one of the preeminent turfmen of the early republic, would often place a small wager on the outcome of a race, a practice which he considered an acceptable way for a gentleman to add to the competitive spirit of such occasions, but he expressed his distaste for those whose gambled due to their desire for profit, rather than as a testament to their love and knowledge of the sport.⁷ A man who owned, and had bred and/or trained, a winning horse was entitled to rejoice in its victory, but only because such an outcome was evidence of his skill, judgment, and effort.
- 4 Despite these condemnations of professional gambling, the practice became ever more prominent at Southern tracks in the decades prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. It was a significant element in drawing spectators to the racetrack, especially as it was one of very few venues for betting in antebellum America which was even marginally respectable, in contrast to taverns, cock-fights, and boxing matches.⁸ But many of those who attended antebellum race meetings lacked sufficient funds to gamble, and even those who could afford to do so might opt out on moral grounds, for fear of social censure, or because they lacked sufficient knowledge of turf matters to make well-informed wagers.⁹ But if neither extensive turf knowledge nor the pleasures of

gambling drew the plurality of visitors to America's tracks, what was the source of racing's wide and deep allure? Why, throughout the nineteenth century, did so many Americans of all races, classes, and genders so passionately embrace it as spectator sport?

- 5 The answer to this question might seem obvious: we can imagine that people attended horse races because they felt affection and admiration for the animals, and enjoyed seeing those deemed as the best in terms of their breeding and training competing against one another. But this essay explores the possibility that, while it is appropriate to describe the audiences at antebellum American races as spectators, in many instances their spectatorship was not primarily directed at the sporting competition taking place upon the course, but was instead focussed on a broader category of spectacle, for which the nation's preeminent racetracks became famous, and which was largely unavailable in other settings in this era, particularly outside of the new nation's few major cities.
- 6 Examples from nineteenth-century Anglo-American visual culture offer some clues in decoding the relationship between spectatorship and spectacle at the racetrack. Especially notable is the English artist William Powell Frith's painting of the Epsom Derby of 1856, which he completed two years later, at which time it was exhibited to tremendous popular acclaim at the prestigious annual summer exhibition at London's Royal Academy of Arts. Viewers flocked to see this work for the same reasons that many Londoners were drawn to the event it depicted. Beginning in the late eighteenth century and expanding throughout the nineteenth, Derby Day emerged as "London's greatest annual spectacle," a notable achievement at a time at which the city offered its inhabitants and visitors a seemingly limitless variety of diversions, from the high-minded promotion of technology and empire at the Great Exhibition of 1851 to the "Deformito-Mania" which was catered for by the numerous freak shows which were on view in the city's less salubrious neighborhoods.¹⁰ News of the Derby's result was eagerly awaited not only across the nation, but throughout the British Empire and in its former colonies in North America, a process accelerated by the laying of the transatlantic cable, which was completed in the same year as Frith's canvas. Such far-flung consumers of Derby news were primarily interested in the achievements of particular horses and jockeys, especially in instances in which racing records were shattered, but for many of those who were able to travel to Epsom, who may have numbered as many as a quarter million per year by the mid-nineteenth century, the source of the attraction lay neither in the race itself nor in the opportunities it provided for trackside gambling, but in the spectacle of the event as a whole. Derby Day attracted the most heterogeneous audience of any public event in Victorian Britain, and it was one of very few venues in which the "respectable" classes of society were permitted, albeit temporarily, to mix with those whom they considered to be beyond such bounds, a situation which generated both trepidation and delight among many attendees and commentators. It was a carnivalesque world in which the usual rules of behavior were temporarily suspended, and participants were allowed to consider themselves "immune to the restrictions of everyday life... based upon the acceptance of trickery and cross-class activities" and of the "unprecedented and often worrying mixing of groups."¹¹ In the words of a correspondent for the *London Times*:

The Downs on a Derby day stand alone as a spectacle, and there is nothing else on earth with which one can compare them... The Grand Stand... looked like a monstrous ridge of people—a very mountain of human beings, while every part of

the course and hill swarmed with a restless crowd of thousands upon thousands... There were card sharpers, organ grinders, nigger melodists—genuine and counterfeit,—dancers upon stilts, acrobats, German bands, gentlemen, ladies, thieves, and policemen, all mixed into that indescribable crowd that goes to form a Derby racecourse. Here is a company of performing dogs... here are tender infants scarce able to stand upon their feet yet quite at home upon their hands... Banjo men and tambourinists are numerous, and... men even go about with coil, machines and batteries, and for the small sum of one penny distribute electric shocks among the crowd[.]¹²

- 7 Derby Day offered a unique opportunity for men and women of all classes both to see and to be seen, to experience “such universal freedom, such jostlings of high and low, [and] such social mixtures, as could be found in no other country in the world,” and thus the race itself was of little interest to many who made their way to Epsom Downs.¹³ Even Charles Dickens, who tasked himself to describe 1851’s Derby Day to the readers of his weekly literary magazine *Household Words*, and devoted thousands of words to this endeavor, admitted that at the end of his excursion he was “far from absolutely certain of the name of the winner of the Derby—knowing nothing whatever about any other race of the day.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, he had greatly enjoyed the experience, and recommended it enthusiastically to his readers.
- 8 Those who were unable to observe or participate in the spectacle of Derby Day in person could do so at one remove by viewing Frith’s painting, which focused on what the artist termed “the kaleidoscopic aspect of the crowd,” and on the picaresque and picturesque aspects of the scene surrounding the racetrack, ignoring the competition itself.¹⁵ Visiting the Royal Academy to view the canvas allowed one not only to vicariously experience the thrills annually on offer at Epsom, but to be part of another spectacle, that of seeing a celebrated and immensely popular work of art, one whose viewers were so numerous and so enthusiastic that the Academy’s management erected heavy barriers with which to separate them from the canvas. *The Derby Day* was exhibited throughout England, then in Europe, in the United States, and in Australia; in the latter location, it was the first major work of modern art to tour the colony. Two years after the painting’s unveiling, the art dealers Leggatt, Hayward, and Leggatt advertised the presence, not of the “extraordinary picture” itself, but of a “splendid etching” thereof, at their gallery in the City of London.¹⁶ Visitors to 79 Cornhill could experience the spectacular thrill of Derby Day at yet another degree of removal.
- 9 In the United States as well as in Britain, “sporting art” as a genre had, from its origins in the early eighteenth century, been created for and consumed by elite individuals, usually male, and with regard to depictions of horse-racing artists typically produced images of individual horses, sometimes accompanied by a jockey, trainer, or groom, for purchase by the animal’s owner or by another wealthy racing enthusiast.¹⁷ George Stubbs painted many English racing champions of the latter half of the eighteenth century, but his images of Eclipse, Hambletonian, et al. show these horses in isolation; even his *Baronet with Samuel Chifney Up* (1791), which portrays the animal and his jockey in mid-race action at the Newmarket course in Suffolk, includes neither competitors and their riders nor members of the audience. In the antebellum United States, the Swiss-born artist Edward Troye, Stubbs’ closest American equivalent, depicted legendary champions such as American Eclipse, Boston, Lecomte, and Revenue, but he invariably located them in paddocks or stables, and rarely included human figures in his compositions.¹⁸ Troye was in great demand among American horse-owners, breeders, and other wealthy turfmen, commanding high prices for his works, but the

images of racing that circulated most widely within the U.S. were those which depicted specific races, rather than individual horses at rest or in training in anonymized settings, and in many of these images the artists focused their attention, and thus that of their viewers, on the crowds of trackside spectators as much as or more than they did on the activities of the horses and their riders. Although images such as Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives' *Peytona and Fashion* (1845) and H. Bosse's *Washington Course, Charleston, S.C.* (1857), unlike Frith's painting, centre on the track, the members of the audience command as much of the artist's, and thus the observer's, attention as the horses do.¹⁹

- 10 Why might artists such as these, who were producing their works for the widest possible public, rather than for a small circle of wealthy turf enthusiasts, devote so much attention to the spectators rather than to the stars of these events? The presence of a large audience emphasized the popularity of the sport as a whole, and of especially celebrated events therein—at the contest between *Peytona and Fashion*, held at Long Island's Union Course on 13 May 1845, thirty thousand people occupied the grandstand, and as many as seventy thousand more were estimated to have gathered on the grounds—and added drama to the scene.²⁰ But images such as Currier and Ives' lithograph of this race, though not as peopled or detailed as Frith's image of *Derby Day*, present the event's spectators not as an undifferentiated mass, but as representatives of the various "tribes" which were conspicuous among the audience, including top-hatted gentlemen, genteel ladies in bonnets and silk dresses, country women carrying baskets of food, and the occasional man or woman of colour. A previous "Great Match Race" between the Northern and Southern champions *Eclipse* and *Sir Henry* drew an estimated fifty thousand spectators to the Union Course in 1823, and an unknown artist's image of the event, widely circulated both as a lithograph and as a printed textile shares the previous picture's emphasis on both the size of the crowd and its heterogeneity, from the elegantly accoutered gentlemen watching the first heat atop their own gleaming thoroughbreds to the young ragamuffins crowded around the base of a viewing platform.²¹
- 11 Writing in 1894, the journalist C.H. Crandall described horse-racing as "a spectacle [that]... one might say that it were worth while [sic] to go once to see the thoroughbreds... The brilliant line of mounted jockeys, resplendent in colored silk, the long and broad oval or straightaway track, the grand-stand, black with people and fluttering with ribbons and banners, all combine to make an attractive scene." But, he asserted, such a scene soon grew dull; "day after day the spectacle is the same. The same lean, nervy horses, or ones almost the same in appearance, are ridden," and in his opinion "one would not go many times to see this sight."²² Why, then, would so many people choose to attend an entire program of races, which in the antebellum era were organized in stints ranging from one long day to an entire week, especially given that many of these attendees were probably not deeply knowledgeable about the competitions, nor able and willing to engage in high-stakes wagering? These Americans followed their English cousins in fashioning themselves as spectators not merely of sport, but of spectacle itself, for which the racetrack, particularly for those who lived outside of the nation's largest cities, was one of very few spaces in which spectacle could flourish, yet which was not devoid of an aura of respectability.
- 12 This claim is borne out by the accounts which many race-goers of the antebellum era offered regarding their experiences. Samuel Mordecai described the race week of 1820s

Richmond as “a perfect carnival,” in which “the race-field presented a brilliant display of equipages, filled with the reigning belles and their predecessors... nothing could appear more animated than such an assembly of beauty and fashion.” While some attendees, mostly young men, “during the heat of the race” rode about in search of “a commanding view of the contest,” the majority spent their time socializing with one another, and their greatest desire was not to learn of or even to profit from the competition’s results, but to attend the Jockey Club’s Race Ball that evening.²³ At the Metairie Association track on the outskirts of New Orleans, “innocent but excited onlookers” thrilled not only to the top-class competition and deep-pocketed wagering for which the course was famed throughout the American sporting world, but to the sight of a crowd in which “knights and their companions from all over the land of chivalry,” as the antebellum South deemed itself, mingled with “planters, race track touts, professional gamblers, [and] well dressed members of the exclusive [Metairie] Jockey Club.”²⁴

- 13 A still more thrilling spectacle was presented by the Charleston races, renowned in the mid-nineteenth century as “the carnival of the State,” which particularly impressed their observers with the size of the crowds they attracted, and with the elegance of the fashions, horses, and carriages on display. Jacob Motte Alston, a kinsman of the previously mentioned Joseph Alston, waxed nostalgic in his old age about his first visit to the city’s Washington course, in relation not to the quality or drama of the contests he observed but to the glamour of its female spectators; “the ladies of Charleston always turned out in full feather on these occasions, and the grandstand was filled with lovely women,” many of whom had arrived at the course in “a coach and four with outriders.”²⁵ Caroline Gilman, another child of the antebellum Charleston elite, described her fellow spectators as a “varied throng” who shared her fascination with “the gay housings of the returning steeds, the richly-panelled carriages, and the floating veils of beauty,” although, as the daughter of a man whom she described as “something of a jockey, and had a direct interest in the races of the season,” she felt “a kind of companionship with the noble creatures,” and thus also enjoyed the race for its own sake.²⁶
- 14 The horses of the spectators, along with their carriages, commanded as much as attention as did those on the track; Robert M. Cahusac, who had travelled sixty miles from his family’s Poplar Hill plantation at Pineville, South Carolina, to the Washington Course, reported to a New York-based kinsman that “you may be sure there was no small stir, among the gentlefolks, who should outdo, in splendid Equipages, but the Palm, was at length reluctantly yielded to Wade Hampton Jun[io]r.,” the son of the nation’s richest planter.²⁷ A Scots visitor expressed disapproval of this equestrian parade, claiming that some of those on display plunged themselves into long-term debt “for the gratification of shewing on this occasion something superior.” He considered it ridiculous that “a Planter will embarrass himself for one half of the year” in order to purchase a new carriage which might “carry off the public opinion with regard to taste,” but his view was not shared by many.²⁸ John Randolph of Roanoke, who was normally intensely chauvinistic about what he saw as the innate superiority of Virginia’s horse culture to that found anywhere else in the nation, pronounced himself impressed by the “elegant equipages” on display at the Charleston races.²⁹ Even Caroline Gilman, enthralled as she was by the spectacle of the races themselves, was proud of the horses and carriage that her father had fitted out “with no small care,” which she judged to have been “in perfect taste; not so conspicuous as to excite

attention, but, when attention was called, fixing it by an air of perfect fitness,” rendering this equipage an ideally refined spectacle that would be appreciated by equally refined spectators.³⁰ Vehicles such as those of the Gilmans and the Hamptons clogged the roads leading to the Washington Course, providing yet another form of spectacle, one consumed by the many pedestrians who lined the approaches, to such an extent that “for two or three hours before their commencement the road leading to the course is so crowded that access to the city is very difficult.”³¹ Such was the draw of the spectators and the spectacle on offer that many of the city’s merchants and shopkeepers set up booths or held auctions, locally referred to as vendues, at the track. The courts were adjourned, the schools were let out, and “clergymen thought it no impropriety to see a well contested race; and if grave physicians played truant, they were sure to be found in the crowd at the race ground,” so great was “the enthusiasm [that] pervaded all classes of the community.”³² Clearly, the sellers of the tracts of land abutting the Washington Course were well-advised in advertising these lots as “afford[ing] an uninterrupted view of the spectators of that manly amusement.”³³

- 15 It is easy to imagine that less elite men, women, and children, whether white, black, or of mixed race, would find fascination in the spectacle of “beautiful women [and] gallant fellows,” dressed in the latest fashions and riding in splendid carriages or mounted on magnificent horses, even if they themselves were unable, due to limits on their time, money, or liberty, to attend the races.³⁴ In an era before the invention of photography, and in which elite women were infrequently seen in public, many members of the lower and middle classes were as keen to view the “promenade of Fashion” on display at the racetrack as their socioeconomic superiors were to participate in it.³⁵ Even the less obviously glamorous members of the crowd might provoke interest. It is important to keep in mind that, with the exception of New Orleans, antebellum Southern cities had quite small populations in comparison with those of the North; at the onset of the Civil War, Richmond was home to approximately 38,000 people, Charleston 40,000, Mobile 29,000, and Natchez barely 6000.³⁶ Of course, many of these urban residents were African-Americans, enslaved or free, and were thus unlikely under most circumstances to be seen as exciting spectacles by their white neighbors. The majority of pre-Civil War Southerners lived in small towns or rural areas; even many of the region’s richest and most socially elite individuals spent much of the year on their remote plantations, with their social interactions confined to their family members and their bondpeople. Unlike the inhabitants of cities such as New York (home in 1860 to over 800,000 people, with a further 250,000 in Brooklyn), Philadelphia (565,000), or Baltimore (215,000), Southerners, even city-dwellers, had limited opportunities to come into contact with new people or to encounter other forms of visual novelty, especially as the majority of Southern cities boasted few public spaces which offered possibilities for cross-class and interracial mixing.³⁷
- 16 Yet many Southerners appear to have craved the opportunity to become spectators, both of spectacle itself and of their fellow participants therein. Throughout the eighteenth century, court days, usually held monthly at the county seat, allowed a “scattered community [to] attain full existence.” These events centered on legal proceedings, but they were augmented by various types of contests, sermons from itinerant preachers, the sale of goods by hawkers, and, inevitably, heavy drinking and frequent brawls.³⁸ A more relaxed but similarly popular event which allowed people to come into contact with one another was the country fair, which the more perspicacious Jockey Clubs, such as those of Williamsburg and Fredericksburg, Virginia, transformed

into rounds of elegant banquets and balls, attracting so many young women that these events became renowned as “a bazaar of beauty,” and thus appealed to young men as well.³⁹ Although many of those who attended races in the following century did so in order to transact business, make political alliances, or arrange marriages for their sons and daughters, for others the principal pleasure to be found trackside was spectacle—human at least as much as equine. Visiting the National Course at Washington, D.C. in 1803, the Massachusetts clergyman-turned-Congressman Manasseh Cutler, in a letter to his son, had little to report regarding the races themselves, but was fascinated by the audience, which he estimated at three to four thousand: “black, and white, and yellow; of all conditions, from the President of the United States to the beggar in his rags; of all ages and both sexes, for I should judge one-third were females.”⁴⁰

- 17 But however varied the spectators of antebellum Southern races might appear to one another, they were actually quite homogeneous in comparison with those whose presence at the Epsom Derby was a source of so much fascination throughout Britain and its empire. The English racecourse appeared to present a microcosm of the globe, as it attracted not only Englishmen and women of all classes, from royalty to vagrants, but also German musicians, Indian sailors (“Lascars”), “swarthy acrobats” (usually Italians), Gypsies, and people of color, some of whom were authentic while others appear to have been “sham nigger” minstrels in blackface.⁴¹ Moreover, these varied types came into close physical contact with one another in the press of the Derby Day crowd, and in some instances might interact with each other; even an aristocrat might opt to have his fortune read by a real or pretended Gypsy, enjoy a tune performed by a “nigger melodist,” or engage the services of one of the many prostitutes in attendance. Southern tracks, by contrast, drew their attendees primarily from among the local or regional white populations, and their Jockey Clubs were careful to separate the members of the elite from white men and women of lower socioeconomic status. People of color, whether enslaved or free, were in most instances barred from admission to the various stands, and in some cases even kept off the course itself, although under these latter circumstances they were sometimes allowed to sit atop the fences which surrounded the track’s grounds. John Beaufain Irving, the chronicler of the antebellum South Carolina Jockey Club, claimed that the city’s Washington Course had a “*Backgammon Board* appearance” due to the presence of groups of black and white spectators therein—but his metaphor implies that the races did not mingle, instead gathering in small, segregated groups, and Irving admitted that “there is not in Charleston the motley variety and assemblage to be seen in ‘merrie old England,’ on a great field day... making up a heterogeneous mass of mirth and excitement.”⁴² In 1835 the *Charleston Courier* claimed that racing crowds normally included “fashionables, and the labouring class, the curious and the idle, the sharper and the flat, the dandy and the *sans culottes*, the gay and the grave, old age and puling infancy,” but the writer did not imply that the members of these groups in any way engaged with one another, or even that they stood or sat in close physical proximity to each other.⁴³

- 18 For many who made their way to Epsom Downs for the Derby, much of the thrill of the spectacle lay in its embrace of excess and liminality; it was carnivalesque, in the Bakhtinian sense of the word, a “Saturnalia” in which the normal structures of appropriate behavior were temporarily overturned.⁴⁴ By contrast, although Southern races were frequently described as “carnivals” by their participants and chroniclers, this term was applicable only in the sense that they were public occasions which centered on mass leisure and entertainment. Members of the elite were spectators of

each other, admiring or envying one another's clothing, horses, and vehicles, and socializing on horseback or from one parked carriage to the next. Judging from the accounts they gave regarding their trackside experiences, the majority of their fellow spectators—non-elite white men and women, and people of color—were largely invisible to them, unless they behaved in a way which their alleged superiors deemed inappropriate, as in 1813, when the members of Richmond's Jockey Club ordered that the booths from which less affluent attendees purchased food and drink be relocated to a distant part of the course because the clubmen were irritated by the noise, smells, and crowds they generated. A quarter century later, a correspondent for the racing periodical *American Turf Register*, rather than praising the mixture of races and classes he encountered at many of the nation's racetracks, described the less privileged members of these audiences, white, black, and mixed-race, as "a most awful phalanx of every shade of colour." Although he admitted that, in his opinion, the contrast between the "lovely and enchanting" and the "loathsome and disgusting" added to the appeal of the former, he nonetheless regretted that "crowds of the most promiscuous character" in attendance included "chimney-sweeps," "urchins," and those of still more "grovelling propensities."⁴⁵ A Charlestonian commentator, writing a decade later, admitted that "high and low, rich and poor" were all members of "the great family of the sporting brotherhood," but nonetheless expressed his anxiety that "unless some active steps be taken to control the mob, the profanum vulgus, *the great unwashed*, and to make them keep their proper distance... the days of racing may be considered as at an end."⁴⁶

- 19 For their part, lower-status whites appear to have stared less at one another than they did at rich men and women and their accoutrements, whether in fascination or in envy; unfortunately, due to a lack of primary documents, we have little idea of the sentiments of African-American spectators. Anne Ritson's 1809 poem *A Poetical Picture of America* depicted a race at Norfolk, Virginia as attracting not only the "gentle, simple, rich, and poor," but also "Negroes [who] the gaming spirit take/And bet and wager ev'ry stake," and claimed that "Males, females, all, both black and white/Together at this sport unite," but this image seems more idealized than accurate, perhaps because Ritson, the wife of a local merchant, was a recent English transplant to the South, rather than a native thereof.⁴⁷ Similarly, the art historian Charles Eldredge describes the Anglo-Guyanese W.S. Hedges' 1841 painting *A Race Meeting at Jacksonville, Alabama* as a depiction of a crowd in which "the races seem to mix with ease," but a more careful perusal of the picture shows African-American slaves or servants as attending upon their masters, rather than as engaging with white attendees on an equal basis.⁴⁸ People of color who attended the Charleston races on their own initiative, rather than to assist their owners or employers, are reported to have shared elite white spectators' passion for gambling, but they did so not only at a far lower financial level but in physical isolation from the latter. Visiting the Washington Course in 1853, the Philadelphia industrialist Joseph Wharton reported that "the darkies were there in shoals and are as great betters as their betters among whom I saw many bank notes change hands while the darkies passed round their half and quarter dollars with much noise"—but these "bettors" bet, and sat, separately from their "betters." Even the spectatorial opportunities of African-Americans, enslaved and free alike, were subject to strict limitations; they might look respectfully and admiringly at white men and women, but it was expected that they would always avoid meeting their eyes.⁴⁹

- 20 By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, English society, though certainly not devoid of political, cultural, and economic tensions, was notably more stable than it had been in decades. A newly popular monarchy encouraged continued respect for the nation's social hierarchy, even among many of those who populated its lower ranks, and an ever larger and more prosperous empire not only generated a plethora of economic and career opportunities for white Britons, but offered them a strong sense of identity as inhabitants of a rich and globally powerful nation. Many elite Southerners, however, lacked this sense of confidence. Not only were they all too aware that their wealth and status rested upon the labor of enslaved men and women who had in recent memory threatened to rebel against their servitude, but they feared that lower-status whites might reject their hegemony, attempting to seize political power for themselves or even allying themselves under certain circumstances with slaves or free people of color.⁵⁰ Derby Day patrons found the sight, sound, and smell of alien or otherwise liminal groups—Irish; Lascars; Cockneys; gypsies; Africans; beggars; prostitutes—unthreatening, and, often, intriguing; their willingness to overturn social boundaries, though just for a day, bespoke a deep sense of security based upon their confidence that these groups were unlikely to overturn the balance of power in mid-Victorian England. Like the figure of the flaneur, first described by Charles Baudelaire, the Derby-goer was both willing and able to “establish his dwelling in the throng” and to “move through the crowd as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity.”⁵¹ By contrast, antebellum Southerners hoped that the spectacle of the racecourse could teach the white “lower orders”—the “labouring class” and the “*sans culottes*”—proper speech and behavior, through observation of the superior ways of their “betters,” just as the promoters of New York's Central Park maintained that the “dominance of elite parkgoers” was the reason that a space that was open to people of all backgrounds would remain orderly and decorous.⁵² Even “crowds of the most promiscuous character,” one Charlestonian journalist claimed, could be improved by studying the behavior of their social superiors at the track, as long as the former accepted that their “mental inferiority [should] naturally submit itself to the guidance of education and talents... the language of manners of the polite are closely imitated, and decorum and elegance succeed vulgarity and impertinence.”⁵³ The presence of enslaved and free people of color further encouraged a sense of white unity despite the sharpness of the social distinctions on display at the track, as long as these black men and women did nothing to challenge their subservient place in the social order. Thus, while the Epsom spectator's gaze enthusiastically embraced everyone and everything within his or her purview, the spectatorial possibilities for the Southern race-goer were carefully controlled by and on behalf of elite participants.
- 21 The world of the antebellum racetrack is in many ways very dissimilar to that of the modern American football, basketball, or baseball stadium. But one can argue that the current culture of sports spectatorship echoes that of this earlier era. Beginning in the early 1980s, the immense screens of Sony's JumboTron and Mitsubishi's Diamond Vision have offered those attending a game something to watch other than the action on the field or court, militating against boredom in competitions that are frequently long-drawn-out and marked by delays for the benefit of television presentation. While these giant screens were initially introduced in American stadiums to allow those in the more distant seats to view the athletes' movements more clearly, over the years this technology has advanced to offer the spectators images of other spectators (such as celebrities in the audience, or, via the “KissCam,” romantic couples). Moreover, those

watching and those being watched on the screen are able to see and interact with one another; the sight of a famous person moves the crowd to cheers, which the celebrity usually acknowledges with a grin or a wave, and the couples caught by the KissCam usually accede to the crowd's demand for the eponymous display of affection, which generates an enthusiastic response.⁵⁴ As the sports blogger Sean Smith has noted, the existence, via these giant screens, of replays of crucial moments and of hints of impending drama means that "at a baseball game, only a small portion of the crowd need actually watch the game at any particular moment," and the rest can look wherever they choose, including at their fellow spectators.⁵⁵ But, according to sports historian George B. Kirsch, it did not require the technological innovations of the 1980s to encourage attendees of baseball games and other team sports to move their gaze from the field to the stands. At one of the United States' earliest baseball competitions, held in Queens, New York in 1858, a journalist described the crowd not only as "a brilliant numerical array," but as offering a "*coup d'oeil*" that "was brilliant in the extreme." This account appeared in the racing journal *Spirit of the Times*, and the game's venue was the Fashion Course, at that time the premier racetrack in the New York City area. This conjuncture of racing and baseball, and of the division of the spectators' attention between the sporting action and the presence of other spectators, raises further questions about the continuity and change in sports spectacle and spectatorship in American history.⁵⁶

NOTES

1. Charles E. Trevathan, *The American Thoroughbred* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), 305.
2. Hamilton Busbey, "The Running Turf in America," *Harper's New Times*, 13 June 1868, 210; Nancy L. Struna, "The North-South Races: American Thoroughbred Racing in Transition, 1823-1850," *Journal of Sport History* 8 (1981), 49; Katherine C. Mooney, *Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 93.
3. Fithian, *Journal and Letters, 1767-1774*, ed. John Rogers Williams (Princeton: Princeton University Library, 1900), 236.
4. Robert Crego, *Sports and Games of the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2003), 88.
5. See Robert Stott, *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).
6. Joseph Alston to Theodosia Burr, 28 December 1800, in Matthew L. Davis, ed., *Memoirs of Aaron Burr* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), vol. I, 427.
7. Lemuel Sawyer, *A Biography of John Randolph, with a Selection from his Speeches* (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co., 1844), 11.
8. See Kenneth D. Cohen, "'The Entreaties and Persuasions of Our Acquaintance': Gambling and Networks in Early America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31 (2011), 599-638, and Linda L. Sturtz, "The Ladies and the Lottery: Elite Women's Gambling in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 104 (1996): 165-184.

9. Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 102-103.
10. Mike Huggins, "Art, Horse Racing, and the 'Sporting' Gaze in Mid-Nineteenth Century England: William Powell Frith's *The Derby Day*," *Sport in History* 33 (2013), 123; Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 1. On spectacle in Victorian London, see also Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978); Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Nancy Rose Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud: Painting Victorian London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
11. Rebecca Cassidy, *Horse People: Thoroughbred Culture in Lexington and Newmarket* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 6; Sharrona Pearl, "Victorian Blockbuster Bodies and the Freakish Pleasure of Looking," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 38 (2016), 96.
12. Allen Guttman, "English Sports Spectators: The Restoration to the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Sport History* 12 (1985), 112; "Sporting Intelligence: The Derby," *The Times* (London), 20 May 1858. See also Dennis Brailsford, "Sporting Days in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of Sport History* 9 (1982), 43.
13. The Earl of Wilton, *On the Sports and Pursuits of the English* (London: Harrison, 1869), 17.
14. "Sporting Intelligence: Epsom Races," *The Times*, 19 May 1858; Dickens, "Epsom," *Household Words*, 7 June 1851.
15. William Powell Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1888), 192.
16. Huggins, "Art, Horse Racing, and the 'Sporting' Gaze," 123; Douglas Fordham, "The Thoroughbred in British Art," in Rebecca Cassidy, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Horseracing* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 36; classified advertisement, *The Times*, 7 June 1860.
17. Donna Landry, *Noble Brutes: How Eastern Horses Transformed English Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 115.
18. It is worthwhile to note that Troye's paintings are among the few images of African-Americans in proximity to the antebellum racing world which depict them as identifiable individuals, and which attest to their skill in caring for, training, and riding thoroughbreds; see Pellom McDaniels III, "An Accidental Historian in Antebellum America: Edward Troye, Thoroughbred Horses, and Representations of African American Manhood and Masculinity," *Ohio Valley History* 15 (2015), 3-22, and Jessica Dallow, "Antebellum Sports Illustrated: Representing African Americans in Edward Troye's Equine Paintings," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 12 (2013), 51-82. See also Mooney, *Race Horse Men*, and Charles Stewart, "My Life as a Slave," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 69 (October 1884), 730-738.
19. The invention of lithography at the close of the eighteenth century and the shift in the 1820s from copper to steel engravings encouraged the development of "an avidly scopic culture—a culture of looking" throughout Europe and North America, and allowed image-makers such as Currier and Ives to share and sell their work to a vast public (Mike Huggins, "The Sporting Gaze: Towards a Visual Turn in Sports and History—Documenting Art and Sport," *Journal of Sport History* 35 [2008], 316.) As a result, both the sport of racing and images thereof increased in popularity. See also Bryan F. Le Beau, *Currier & Ives: America Imagined* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).
20. Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 39; National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, "Off to the Races in 1845," *O Say Can You See?: Stories from the National Museum of American History*; <http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2012/05/off-to-the-races-in-1845.html>, accessed 12 March 2019.

21. On the Match Race phenomenon, see John Eisenberg, *The Great Match Race: When North Met South in America's First Sports Spectacle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); on the contest between Eclipse and Sir Henry, see Paul E. Johnson, "Northern Horse: American Eclipse as a Representative New Yorker," *Journal of the Early Republic* 33 (2013): 701-726.
22. C.H. Crandall, "Tendencies of the Turf," *The North American Review* 159 (1894), 374.
23. Mordecai, *Richmond*, 178-179.
24. Rollin G. Osterweis, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 169; Robert C. Reinders, *End of an Era: New Orleans, 1850-1860* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1964), 160.
25. Irving, *Jockey Club*, 11; Childs, ed., *Rice Planter and Sportsman*, 19.
26. Caroline Gilman, *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1838), 116, 111, 113.
27. Robert M. Cahusac to William Porcher, 17 February 1822, 43/568, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina; Frederic A. Porcher, "Upper Beat of St. John's, Berkeley: A Memoir," *Transactions of the Huguenot Society of South Carolina* 13 (1906), 67.
28. J.B. Dunlop, quoted in Raymond A. Mohl, ed., "The Grand Fabric of Republicanism: A Scotsman Describes South Carolina, 1810-11," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 71 (1970), 186.
29. George C. Rogers, Jr., *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 114; Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835* (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 46.
30. Gilman, *Recollections*, 111.
31. Osterweis, *Romanticism*, 129; Records of the Circular Congregational Church, Charleston, account ledger 1777-1806, 28/690/9, South Carolina Historical Society.
32. Emma Hart, *Building Charleston: Town and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2010), 55, 138; Charles Fraser, *Reminiscences of Charleston* (Charleston: Garnier & Company, 1969 [originally published 1854]), 62.
33. *Charleston City Gazette*, 28 August 1790, quoted in Kevin R. Eberle, *A History of Charleston's Hampton Park* (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), 29.
34. Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 46.
35. James Shoolbred to John Shoolbred, 8 March 1791, James Shoolbred Letterbooks and Journals, 1786-1796, South Carolina Historical Society (thanks to Sally Hadden for drawing my attention to this document). While the theory of "herrenvolk democracy," which asserts that, throughout the antebellum South, whites of all classes were united in support of slavery and white supremacy (a claim first advanced in George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* [New York: Harper and Row, 1971]), has been hotly debated for half a century, it is evident that "demands for ritualistic respect and recognition" were a frequent aspect of cross-class relations in the antebellum South (Eugene D. Genovese, "Yeomen Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy," *Agricultural History* 49 [1975], 336; Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, 2nd ed. [Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014], 18).
36. "Largest Cities in the South in 1860," *The Civil War Gazette*;
<https://civilwargazette.wordpress.com/2006/12/12/largest-cities-in-the-south-in-1860/>, 12 December 2006, accessed 12 March 2019; John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 190.
37. "Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1860," U.S. Bureau of the Census;
<https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab09.txt>, 15 June 1998, accessed 12 March 2019.
38. Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 90, 317; A.G. Roeber, "Authority, Law, and Custom: The Rituals of Court Day in Tidewater Virginia, 1720 to 1750," *William and Mary Quarterly* s3:37 (1980), 37.

39. Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 46; Moncure Daniel Conway, *Barons of the Potomack and the Rappahannock* (New York: The Grolier Club, 1892), 120.
40. Manasseh Cutler, 12 November 1803, in William Parker Cutler and Julia Perkins Cutler, *Life, Journals and Correspondence of Rev. Manasseh Cutler* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co., 1888), vol. II, 142-143. See also Lara Otis, "Washington's Lost Racetracks: Horse Racing from the 1760s to the 1930s," *Washington History* 24 (2012): 136-154.
41. Felix Folio, "Rural Reminiscences," *Country Words: A North of England Magazine of Literature, Science, and Art* 17 (23 February 1867), 259.
42. Randy J. Sparks, "Gentleman's Sport: Horse Racing in Antebellum Charleston," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 93 (1992), 21; Irving, *Jockey Club*, 15, 14; italics in original.
43. *Charleston Courier*, 23 February 1835, italics in original, quoted in William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, *The Web of Progress: Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828-1843* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 140.
44. See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, transl. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).
45. "Sports of the Turf in America," *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine* 8:9 (May 1837), 423, 421.
46. "Charleston (S.C.) Races," *Spirit of the Times*, 4 March 1848; italics in original.
47. "A Lady [Anne Ritson]," *A Poetical Picture of America* (London: The Author, 1809), 79; Walter Osborne, *Quarter Horse* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967), 50.
48. Eldredge, *Tales from the Easel: American Narrative Paintings from Southeastern Museums, circa 1800-1950* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 40.
49. Quoted in H. Larry Ingle, "Joseph Wharton Goes South, 1853," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 96 (1995), 323; Dell Upton, *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 100.
50. The threat of significant slave uprisings had terrified whites in South Carolina in 1822 and in Virginia in 1831, led by, respectively, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner.
51. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), in Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1992), 399-400.
52. Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 258.
53. *Charleston Courier*, 24 February 1830, quoted in Maurie D. McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 26; Sparks, "Gentleman's Sport," 25.
54. "Stock Photo: Jack Nicholson. Jack Nicholson plays up to the camera as he has a funny Yankees Jumbotron moment," Alamy; <http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-jack-nicholson-jack-nicholson-plays-up-to-the-camera-as-he-has-a-funny-158173433.html>, accessed 3 November 2017; Arthur P. Solomon and Allyn I. Freeman, *Making It in the Minors* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 90.
55. Sean Smith, "The Privilege of Absence," SportsBabel; <http://www.sportsbabel.net/2005/05/the-privilege-of-absence.htm>, 20 May 2005 (accessed 12 March 2019).
56. Kirsch, *Baseball in Blue and Gray: The National Pastime during the Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 105; italics in original. On the creation of historically specific varieties of spectators, see Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) and Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Thanks to Andrew Fearnley for suggesting these sources.

ABSTRACTS

This paper argues that, in the antebellum United States, many people attended horse races at least as much from a desire to produce and consume spectacle as from a fascination with the sport itself. In many instances, their spectatorship was not simply directed at the actions of the horses and jockeys, but was instead focused on a broader category of spectacle, for which the nation's preeminent racetracks became famous, and which was largely unavailable in other venues in this era, particularly outside of the new nation's few major cities. Drawing upon a varied corpus of textual and visual sources, I contend that the greatest thrill for many race attendees was the opportunity to engage with, or at least look at, a large number of unfamiliar individuals, particularly those who occupied the highest and lowest positions in American society, especially that of the South, in which the majority of tracks were located in the pre-Civil War era. However, these audiences, unlike those who were both the subjects and the viewers of English artist William Powell Frith's celebrated 1858 painting of Derby Day at Epsom Downs, experienced anxiety as well as entertainment from the proximity of "others," particularly African-Americans (whether enslaved or free) and poor whites; they hoped that these groups would improve their manners by imitating those of their "betters," but at the same time they, unlike the Epsom audiences, shied away from "crowds of the most promiscuous character." Thus, the spectacle of human physical, social, and cultural diversity was simultaneously a source of pleasure and a harbinger of social discord.

INDEX

Keywords: spectacle, racing, antebellum, South, horse, Derby Day

AUTHOR

NATALIE ZACEK

Natalie Zacek is a senior lecturer in American Studies at the University of Manchester. Her first book, *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670-1776* (2010) won the Royal Historical Society's Gladstone Prize, and she is currently completing a monograph on the cultural history of thoroughbred horse-racing in the nineteenth-century United States.