



## NAVIGATING THE CROSSROADS OF CULTURE, RACE, AND EMPIRE:

Alton Augustus Adams Sr., the First Black Band Master of the U.S. Navy

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“Let me write the music of a nation and I care not who make its laws”

Qtd in Adams, *The Memoirs of Alton  
Augustus Adams, Sr.: First Black Bandmaster  
Of The United States Navy*. (121)

## INTRODUCTION

On March 31, 1917, the United States of America purchased the then Danish West Indies for 25 million dollars, thus expanding their territorial rule.<sup>1</sup> The three islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John, along with several smaller islands, were renamed the Virgin Islands of the United States and would be governed by the U.S. Navy. However, U.S. cultural influence had long preceded the arrival of the naval administration. With the U.S. cultural products that already had been arriving in the Virgin Islands, such as phonographs and correspondence education, so did a cultural construct of America. One person particularly susceptible to U.S. cultural influences was a prominent Virgin Islander who would become a cultural bridge between the U.S. Virgin Islands and the U.S. mainland. Alton Augustus Adams was a musically gifted child, who from the age of nine onwards showed great discipline to reach his goal of becoming a professional musician. His cultural framework of reference was a mixture of indigenous and foreign genres of music, but Adam's musical taste was mostly influenced by records that reached the Virgin Islands from overseas: "Standing outside the house of an islander who owned a phonograph machine, he listened to orchestral and band selections, operatic airs, and other contemporary European and Euro-American music"<sup>2</sup>. His greatest example was John Philip Sousa, an American band leader.<sup>3</sup> Adams' contact with the U.S. did not stop at listening to records. He subscribed to several music periodicals, and he received his formal musical training by taking a correspondence course with Dr. Hugh A. Clark of the University of Pennsylvania<sup>4</sup>.

A few months after the U.S. took over the Virgin Islands, at age 28, Adams was appointed as the first black band leader in the U.S. Navy. As such, Adams functioned as a bridge between the all-white Navy administration and the predominantly black population of the Virgin Islands.<sup>5</sup> Adams regarded music to be an important means of constructing an identity, and although he was "proud to represent his race and proud of his black cultural heritage"<sup>6</sup>, his musical aesthetic was distinctively white. Culture, in his words, "must be

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Clague. "Instruments of identity: Alton Augustus Adams Sr., the Navy band of the Virgin Islands, and the sounds of social change." *Black Music Research Journal* 18.1/2 (1998). 21

<sup>2</sup> Samuel A Floyd. "Alton Augustus Adams: The first black bandmaster in the US Navy." *The Black Perspective in Music* (1977), 174

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Alton A. Adams, Clague, Mark. *The Memoirs Of Alton Augustus Adams, Sr.: First Black Bandmaster Of The United States Navy*. Berkeley : University Of California Press; 2008. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 4.

developed from within and comes most forcibly from contact with and receptiveness to people (the cultured and the refined) whose high intellectual attainments are then absorbed into the spiritual substance and bloodstream, as it were, of ones being".<sup>7</sup> For Adams, 'high culture' was inextricably linked to discipline and intellectualism, and was the key to a successful civilization. Music, in his opinion, served as a civilizing agency.<sup>8</sup>

In 1924, Adams' band was sent abroad to tour the U.S. mainland. The band would be a cultural ambassador for the Virgin Islands, and was aimed to expand the tourism industry<sup>9</sup>. The tour was very well received. During the tour, Adams met with prominent black leaders such as W.E.B. Dubois, with whom he would stay in touch through correspondence and visits. Adams' ideas about race were, to some extent, in agreement with the ideas prevalent in the dominant white American culture. With regards to the black community in the Virgin Islands, he was a strong believer of uplifting the black race through hard work and cultivation. He considered the tolerant cultural environment of the Virgin Islands to provide ample possibilities to achieve that goal.<sup>10</sup> Adams' esteem of the black community in the mainland was low, as is illustrated by his account of the mainland tour:

That affair was a real eye-opener for us, since it provided our first experience with the professional caliber, the cultivation, the achievements, and the dignified character of the colored middle class in the United States. Like many islanders, I had a highly stereotyped view of the American Negro as a downtrodden, indolent menial unable to rise above his former slave status.<sup>11</sup>

Alton Augustus Adams can be positioned at a crossroads of American imperialism, both territorial and cultural, and race relations, both between peoples of African descent in different countries, and within the United States. As a product of extensive cultural transfer, first as a Virgin Islander who was raised in a country under Danish government, and later as a link between the Virgin Islands and the U.S., Adams provides a remarkable case study to examine the works of cultural transfer in combination with race relations. Adams served simultaneously as an ambassador for America towards the Virgin Islanders, and as an ambassador for the Virgin Islands in America, particularly during the 1924 tour of north-eastern America. Additionally, it may be argued that the all-black band was employed by the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 25

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 67

<sup>9</sup> Clague, "Instruments of Identity", 37

<sup>10</sup> Adams and Clague, *The Memoirs*, 26

<sup>11</sup> Adams and Clague, *The Memoirs*, 128

U.S. Navy not only to promote the Virgin Island as a holiday destination, but also to counter notions of institutional racism.

### **Overview of academic discussion**

#### Alton Augustus Adams

Little has been written about Alton Augustus Adams. His autobiography, which is comprised of, amongst others, personal interviews, writings for newspapers, and correspondence, was edited by musicologist Mark Clague and published in 1998. Furthermore, Clague has published an article in the *Black Music Journal*, which aims to analyze Adams “as an interpreter at the crossroads of race, class, and ethnicity” to “clarify not only his own activities, writings, and position within the island’s political situation, but also [shed] light on the social tensions within the Virgin Islands specifically, and, more generally, the Harlem Renaissance”.<sup>12</sup> Clague argues that Adams’ approach to embrace, rather than to oppose American influence, was a successful means to uplift the Virgin Islanders<sup>13</sup>. However, he does not position Adams within the cultural context of the Virgin Islands: Adams received critique for his cooperation with the US Navy, and it is likely that he is not a ‘typical’ Islander.<sup>14</sup> As such, however, he provides an excellent case study to map the workings of American Cultural transfer. The term ‘culture’ has been explained by Akira Iriye as “a shared system of beliefs, artifacts, ideology, customs, and a way of life”.<sup>15</sup> For the purpose of this research, focus will lie on culture as a set of beliefs and an ideology, specifically about race and politics. Beliefs and ideology, however, are expressed through multiple media: aside from directly addressing matters of race in written text, Adams’ used a predominantly white aesthetic in his musical practices, and was even dismissive of quintessential black styles of music such as jazz.<sup>16</sup> Thus, analyzing the cultural products produced by Adams, in addition to his direct referrals to race and politics, will advance insight in his beliefs and ideology.

#### Cultural Transfer

Rob Kroes and Robert Rydell provide an academic framework for (American) cultural transfer, arguing that indeed, people on the receiving end are not merely passive audiences,

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<sup>12</sup> Clague, Mark. "Instruments of identity: Alton Augustus Adams Sr., the Navy band of the Virgin Islands, and the sounds of social change." *Black Music Research Journal* 18.1/2 (1998). 24.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Adams and Clague, *The Memoirs*, 175-86.

<sup>15</sup> Qtd. In Gienow-Hecht, Jessica CE. "Shame on US? Academics, Cultural Transfer, and the Cold War: A Critical Review." *Diplomatic history* 24.3 (2000): 465

<sup>16</sup> Clague, “Instruments of Identity”, 41

but actively construct an idea of America as they interact with American cultural products<sup>17</sup>. In Adams' case, this 'idea' would likely have been shaped by phonographs, newspapers, and correspondence education. As Kroes and Rydell have shown, foreign audiences can simultaneously embrace and reject American culture, and adhere different meanings to products, which are as much a result of their own culture as they are of their perception of American culture. This viewpoint is further described by Jessica Gienow-Hecht in her overview of the debate about cultural transfer. She explains how the debate has shifted from focusing merely on the 'sending' end as a cultural imperialist power to regarding cultural transfer as a "continuous process of negotiation among ethnic, regional, and national groups"<sup>18</sup>. Richard Pells stresses the importance of recognizing people's ability to "maintain a dual set of allegiances"<sup>19</sup>, and further detracts from the notion of American cultural influence by stating that modernism, rather than the United States, caused the expansion of mass culture. This study will focus on the agency of audiences, but also recognizes the impact American culture has had on other cultures.

### Race and culture

Penny von Eschen has written a canonical work on cultural ambassadorship: *Satchmo Blows Up the World*. Although this work focuses on the jazz ambassador tours of the 1960s, organized by the US state department, she does provide a more general framework in which politics, culture, and race are linked<sup>20</sup>. Her argument of how the tours affected the civil rights movement in the US, and how the jazz ambassadors were sent out to promote a kind of freedom they did not enjoy at home, may also be applicable to the 1924 tour of Adams' band: Adams' tour of the mainland brought him in direct contact with some of the most important advocates of black civil rights, who may have instilled in him a new sense of racial consciousness.

Much has been written on racial inequality, and how it is rooted deeply in American culture. In his article "Rethinking Race and Nation", Nikhil Singh argues that African Americans were placed outside of U.S. society to help define the nation. Indeed, as Singh puts it: "Racial definitions enabled the very process of thinking about U.S. national belonging

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<sup>17</sup> Rydell, Robert W., and Rob Kroes. *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Gienow-Hecht, "Shame on Us", 491

<sup>19</sup> Pells, Richard. "Who's Afraid of Steven Spielberg?." *Diplomatic History* 24.3 (2000): 502

<sup>20</sup> Von Eschen, Penny. *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004.

as both a normative and a universal condition”<sup>21</sup>. However, paradoxically, African Americans at the same time remained very much a part of society: they were “proscribed from participating in the social state in which they live[d], [and were] that part of the public whose relation to the public is always in radical doubt” This notion puts racism at the core of U.S. society as a “social and institutional fact”.<sup>22</sup> The othering of African Americans has caused an ongoing search of a strong sense of self-ownership, of having a collective identity that is recognized as a part of American nationality. In the 1920s, Harlem would become the center of a social and cultural movement: the Harlem Renaissance. As Alain Locke states: “In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is – or promises at least to be – a race capital”<sup>23</sup>. Within the Harlem Renaissance, however, there were different ideas on how racial uplift should be accomplished. Placing Alton Augustus Adams, as a black Virgin Islander in service of the U.S. Navy, within this movement will expose which ideas about race reached Adams as a part of mainstream American culture, and if, and how they were subsequently adapted after coming into contact with prominent members of the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, the American construct of race, and how it behaved in dialogue between people with the same skin color, but with different cultural backgrounds, will be brought to light.

### The workings of American Empire

As Robert Philipson states, “American imperialism usually took the form of economic and political influence rather than outright annexation or the proclamation of a formal empire”.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the American ideals of egalitarianism, individual freedom, and democracy are hard to rhyme with imperialism, and thus, American Empire was until recently not a much studied subject in academics. Either the belief in Manifest Destiny, or the 1823 Monroe Doctrine were used to justify territorial expansion of the U.S., which was often in fact driven by a desire for commercial or diplomatic power. Sidney Milkis argues:

Between the end of the Spanish- American War and the dawn of the Great , the United States sent troops to Latin American countries 32 times. It used the Roosevelt Corollary, an addition to the 1823 Monroe Doctrine declaring Latin America to be a United States ‘sphere of influence’, to justify intervention. In the corollary, Teddy

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<sup>21</sup> Singh, Nikhil Pal. "Rethinking Race and Nation." *American Studies: An Anthology* (2009): 9

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>23</sup> Locke, Alain. “The New Negro”. *The Concise Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Paul Lauter. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Vol. 2. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2014. 789.

<sup>24</sup> Philipson. “The Harlem Renaissance as Postcolonial Phenomenon”. *African American Review* 40, no. 1 (2006): 148.

Roosevelt proclaimed, "Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power."<sup>25</sup> (qtd. in Milkis 109)

As "no consistent colonial policy was ever developed",<sup>26</sup> the systems of American Empire are harder to lay bare than those of Western-European powers.<sup>27</sup> However, indeed, American territorial expansion in the Caribbean had a profound effect on both the annexed territories, and the U.S. Culture itself. Firstly, the American masters encountered new territories which held large black majorities. Assuming the black majorities abroad and the black minorities within the U.S. were analogous, the American rulers "imposed their racial attitudes upon the inhabitants of their possessions" by recruiting officials and overseers from the U.S. South, as they, was the thought, already had experience in managing black people.<sup>28</sup> However, in turn, the new subjects, along with other 'foreign' black people, also exercised great influence on American culture, and played an important role in addressing the U.S. domestic race relations. For example, Marcus Garvey, who became instrumental in the cause for racial equality, originated from Jamaica and made use of the platform with which the U.S. had provided him: the large Caribbean networks in the larger cities.

The argument that Amy Kaplan makes in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* can thus be of great importance to this research. She focusses on how international relations greatly shaped American culture. The paradox she mentions, of how the 'other' helped to define American culture, but was simultaneously placed within and outside of the empire, seamlessly applies to the case of Adams. America's practices were at once imperialist and isolationist: it enlarged its empire through the purchase of the Danish West Indies, yet, was reluctant to let it influence the domestic space<sup>29</sup>. This may explain why Adams, whose beliefs and music both were very adaptable to American culture, was so well-received on the mainland.

The definition of Empire Charles Maier uses, is applicable to this study:

Empire is a form of political organization in which the social elements that rule in the dominant state [...] create a network of allied elites in regions abroad who accept

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<sup>25</sup> Qtd. in Ibid. 149

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Kaplan, Amy. *The anarchy of empire in the making of US culture*. Vol. 32. Harvard University Press, 2005.

subordination return for the security of their position in their own administrative unit (the ‘colony’ or, in spatial terms, the ‘periphery’).<sup>30</sup>

This study argues that the relation between the U.S. and the Virgin Islands can be considered one of having an empire, rather than ‘potentially imperial’, as Maier describes the situation in the Caribbean.<sup>31</sup> The relation between the U.S. and the Virgin Islands furthermore complies with the preconditions Maier poses as defining an imperial relation: There is cultural, economic, and political hierarchy. The U.S. exported their ideas about race and made use of the hierarchical structures that were already established in the Virgin Islands, further developing social and racial inequality.

### **Research question**

The main questions this research aims to answer are: How can the 1924 goodwill tour of Alton Augustus Adams’ U.S. Virgin Island Navy band be explained as a cultural product of U.S. imperialism, and how did race relations affect interaction between center and periphery? How did Adams use his agency to negotiate his artistic identity whilst dealing with the racial forces at play in U.S. empire?

In order to do so, certain explorations must be made. First of all, Alton Augustus Adams must be positioned within his contemporary cultural context of the Virgin Islands. How typical was he as a chosen representative of the Virgin Islands? In which ways and to which extent was he influenced by American culture? During his mainland tour, his ethnic and racial ‘double consciousness’ as both being a Virgin Islander and an American, and his identity as a product of the African diaspora, would be affected by interactions with American culture, specifically through contact with prominent members of the Harlem Renaissance. Can a common goal and/or method of racial uplift and ideology be detected between Adams and prominent members of the American black community, and can a change in Adams’ ideas be perceived? Upon the return of Adams to the Virgin Islands, in what way has his position towards race in general, and his cultural identity specifically, changed?

By answering these questions, a deeper understanding of the processes and interplay of cultural transfer and race relations may be reached. As Gienow-Hecht states, there is a lack

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Maier. *Among empires: American ascendancy and its predecessors*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 67

of research on cultural transfer, and how it shaped the image of American culture abroad, in the decades prior to World War II. Studying the early patterns of cultural transfer may provide “early signs, influences, and explanations of American culture” which will ultimately help to explain the current works of cultural transfer, particularly the construct of race as a part of American culture.<sup>32</sup> In other words, Using Adams’ experience as a case study will lay bare the construction and mechanisms of U.S. empire, as well as offering a lens through which the workings of racial forces in the hierarchical structures of U.S. empire can be distinguished.

### **Methodology**

There are ample sources that provide insight into Adams’ motives and opinions. The Center for Black Music research in Chicago holds an extensive collection of primary sources on Adams, including autobiographical and biographical materials, correspondence, speeches and writings, as well as music manuscripts. These materials have been used to comprise an autobiography and two in-depth articles on Adams, however, they focus on Adams as an individual rather than as a part of a greater process. This research will use the primary source material by looking specifically at contact between the American mainland and Adams, and Adams’ personal commentary on the United States.

In Chapter one, in order to contextualize Adams within a larger frame, his portrayal of life at the Virgin Islands, at the time still the Danish West Indies, will be compared with other sources, such as studies and personal recollections. An academic interest in the U.S. Virgin Islands only arose when they were purchased from Denmark in 1917, and not much has been written on them since. However, the sources available will suffice in adding other voices to Adams’ narrative. Furthermore, cultural transfer from the U.S. to the West Indies prior to the arrival of the U.S. Navy will be investigated. The second chapter will focus on the arrival of the naval administration, and compare Adams’ viewpoints with those of other prominent Virgin Islanders. Additionally, American coverage of the purchase in contemporary newspapers and journals will be analyzed in order to determine how, if at all, the purchase was perceived by both the American mainstream, and the African American community specifically. In chapter three, Clague’s analysis of how Adams relates to the Harlem Renaissance will be extended by looking more in-depth at different ideas about how racial equality should be achieved, and where Adams can be placed within these schools of thought.

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<sup>32</sup> Gienow-Hecht, “Shame on Us”, 491.

Specifically, the 1924 mainland tour as the epitome of cultural interaction as well as an important event in race relations will be analyzed by means of investigating Adams' autobiographical materials, correspondence, and other coverage of the tour. Lastly, in chapter four, Adams' expressions on culture and race will be evaluated to see in what way the tour influenced him.

## Chapter 1 – Alton Augustus Adams and The Virgin Islands Prior to the Arrival of the U.S. Administration

This chapter aims to convey a broad historic overview of Virgin Island culture, of which Alton Adams was a product, and, as will become clear, the specific cultural aspects which he used to form his identity as a Virgin Islander. Focus will lie on musical practice in the Virgin Islands in general compared to Adams' practice specifically, and the early workings of U.S. cultural transfer as a precursor of U.S. empire, especially with regard to racial notions. Thus, this chapter will answer the following questions: How typical was Adams as a chosen representative of the Virgin Islands? In which ways and to which extent was he influenced by American culture? How did he negotiate between his racial identity on the Virgin Islands and his perceived notions of race on the U.S. mainland?

### **Cultural History**

Prior to becoming what is now called the U.S. Virgin Islands, the group of islands of St Thomas, St John, and St. Croix, had known a multitude of owners and groups of inhabitants. Christopher Columbus discovered the Virgin Islands in 1493, and named them after St Ursula and her 11.00 sea-going virgin martyrs. The indigenous people, mainly comprised by the Arawaks and Caribs, two Indian tribes, were expunged over the next few decades, suffering the same fate as the Native Americans upon coming into contact with Europeans. Thus, by the time the Danes colonized the Virgin Islands in 1672, only few native inhabitants were still present.<sup>33</sup> In her study of U.S. Virgin Island migration, Lomarsh Roopmarine provides insight in the successive ethnic majorities that populated the Virgin Islands after European discovery. European settlers did not migrate to the Islands in great numbers until over a century after initial contact, in the 1620s. A wide variety of European nationalities resided on the islands, as the contest over colonization of the New World continued. Furthermore, the migrants came from very different socio-economic and geographical backgrounds. Some migrated from Europe, others were born in the Caribbean. Additionally, the migrants varied in class from indentured servants to plantation holders. This diversity “allowed for the

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<sup>33</sup> Isaac Dookhan. *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States*. Kingston, Jamaica: Canoe Press, 1974. 3-28.

replication of European indifference and contempt toward nationalities as well as for the reinforcement of class-structured relations in the Caribbean”.<sup>34</sup>

The Virgin Island economy was based on agricultural trade, in which sugar plantations were the main source of profit. The economy rested on the slave system, like many other colonies in the Americas did. Moving from Denmark to the Caribbean did not appeal to many Danes, and thus, as was the case in many other colonies, the percentage of African slaves greatly outnumbered the presence of white Europeans. Throughout the Danish rule, the variety of present cultural influences remained. For example, Nevillle Hall describes how during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century St. Croix and St Thomas remained largely influenced by the British and the Dutch, respectively. Hall coins the Danish colonies “an Empire with no dominion”.<sup>35</sup> He argues the Danish had colonized the islands only in the narrow political sense, which is illustrated by the content of an 1840 opinionated article in a local newspaper:

The Danish flag flew over islands in the West Indies, but not over populations to which it was precious and sacrosanct. Whilst Irishmen and Scots flocked to the islands in their hundreds, Danes elected to remain at home, preferring destitution to migration. Whilst all the world's advanced nations established commercial houses in St. Thomas, and provided their nationals with opportunities for rapid mobility, Danish merchants lived a life of wretched toil at home.<sup>36</sup>

The import of African slaves started in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and saw its prime during the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Conditions for slaves were arduous, and they were subjected to as grim circumstances as on most other colonies. They were seen as property rather than human beings, which is explicitly mentioned in Governor Philip Gardelin’s Placate of 5 September 1733. The placate would remain “the only legal code affecting slaves in the Danish West Indies”<sup>37</sup> for over a century. In 1754, the Danish crown took over from the Royal Chartered Danish West India and Guinea Company, which up until then had annexed and governed the three main Islands.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the Islands fell under direct rule of the Danish King. Under King Fredrik V, slaves were a granted some notion of humanity, as becomes clear in his "Reglement for Slaverne" of 3 February 1755, which demands religious instruction for

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<sup>34</sup> Lomarsh Roopnarine. "United States Virgin Islands migration." *Social and Economic Studies* (2008): 131-156.

<sup>35</sup> Neville AT Hall, and B. W. Higman. *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*. Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1992. 13-19

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 19

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 40

<sup>38</sup> Dookhan, *History*, 91

slaves.<sup>39</sup> Nearly a century later, in 1846, Governor Von Scholten installed a public school system for slaves until the age of 12,<sup>40</sup> along with many other reforms in favor of the black population. In 1848, after a successful slave uprising on St. Croix, he issued an emancipation proclamation.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to slaves, there was an increasingly diverse class of free black people on the Virgin Islands. Officially, according to King Fredrik V's ordinance, they enjoyed the same civil rights as every other subject of the Danish Kingdom. However, in effect, they were strictly segregated from the white class. Some did, however, actively "disassociate themselves from those of their class whose patterns of social activity were often indistinguishable from those of slaves", creating a black elite that placed itself above slaves and freedmen "whose patterns of social activity were often indistinguishable from those of slaves."<sup>42</sup>

Although the Danish rulers supported the improvement from a moral, Christian point of view, Hall argues there was also a pragmatic reasoning behind it. People of African heritage greatly outnumbered white Europeans, and this, in combination with a very limited Danish military presence, may in part have accounted for the successful demands slaves made.<sup>43</sup> In sum, although indeed the Danish West Indies were progressive towards the position of people of African descent in comparison to other nations, and the attitude towards slavery changed throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, slaves and freedmen were still separated from, and considered unequal to European descendants.

## Identity

Alton Augustus Adams, in his autobiography, repeatedly stresses the tolerance towards black people under the Danish rule, and takes pride in the multitude of "visiting" cultures, from which, he argues, of each the best traits should be taken to contribute to a collective Virgin Island identity.<sup>44</sup> The manuscript of his autobiography, as well as the published introduction, reveal his goal: at the time of writing, which is in 1973, Adams feels that the younger generations of U.S. Virgin Islanders "have arrived at a critical crossroad in their historical

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<sup>39</sup> Hall, *Slave Society*, 40

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 205

<sup>41</sup> Pauline Kupcok. "Part III: Cultural Highlights: A Brief History of the Virgin islands, USA." *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 24.4 (1950): 210-216.

<sup>42</sup> Hall, *Slave Society*, 162

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 54-6.

<sup>44</sup> Alton A. Adams, Clague, Mark. *The Memoirs Of Alton Augustus Adams, Sr.: First Black Bandmaster Of The United States Navy*. Berkeley : University Of California Press; 2008. 26

development, characterized by confusion and doubt about themselves and their future”.<sup>45</sup> It is unclear to which events he refers, although it may concern the failed attempts of the U.S. Virgin Islanders to establish their own constitution, replacing the U.S. Congress’ Revised Organic Act of 1954, which still governs the U.S. Virgin Islands.<sup>46</sup>

Lomarsh Roopnarine confirms the lack of a clear dominant cultural presence in her study on social identity in the contemporary U.S. Virgin Islands. She states:

While Creolization exists in the USVI, it does not play an important role in the development of an identity that is neither wholly African nor European. The USVI, like other Caribbean islands, was historically a place where fragments of world civilizations met and intermixed physically and culturally and where new tropes of identities were formed. Actually, the entire colonial period was evolving into a state of creolization.<sup>47</sup>

Because there has never been a dominant culture on the Virgin Islands after the indigenous people were eradicated, Roopnarine argues, there has never been a collective Virgin Island identity. Stuart Hall, in his study on African diaspora and identity in the Caribbean, poses that the search for an identity is as much “a matter of becoming as [...] of being”. An identity is not a fixed entity that can be “uncovered”. It belongs to the future as much as to the past.” Indeed, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past”.<sup>48</sup> As Frantz Fanon poses in his canonical work on post-colonialism, “a national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence”.<sup>49</sup>

Although Adams sees the difficulty of defining a people that consists of so many different cultural heritages, rather than viewing it as a hindrance, he sees it as a unique trait of the Virgin Islands. Indeed, he argues, the solution to the perceived ‘identity crisis’

“...lays not via a remote African past, nor by the uncritical emulation of the cultural outcroppings of the American Rights Movement, [although these carry some relevance], but by a return to, and appreciation of, the highly cosmopolitan cultural

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<sup>45</sup> Adams, undated, box 1, folder 5, Alton Augustus Adams collection, The Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College Chicago.

<sup>46</sup> Lomarsh Roopnarine. "Social identity in the modern United States Virgin Islands." *Social Identities* 16, no. 6 (2010): 791

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 795

<sup>48</sup> Stuart Hall. "Cultural identity and diaspora." (1990). 225.

<sup>49</sup> Frantz Fanon. "On national culture." *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism* (1963): 198-219.

amalgam that evolved in the Virgin Islands as a consequence of unique historical, sociological, and ecological factors”.<sup>50</sup>

This cosmopolitan cultural amalgam, according to Adams, knew its best time under Danish rule from 1672 to 1917. He praises three specific characteristics of Danish influence, which are: “a strong sense of discipline, a cosmopolitan culture of high refinement, and a social atmosphere and cast of mind free of invidious racial distinctions and prejudices”.<sup>51</sup> He explains that indeed, social mobility was possible, even promoted, through hard work and education. This is not entirely in conjunction with sources like Isaac Dookhan and Neville Hall, who describe the racial inequality present under Danish rule. Adams states, however, that such inequality was not the result of inherent racism, but of social and political considerations.<sup>52</sup> Throughout his autobiography, Adams conveys a strong Western aesthetic: he quotes writers like lord Bron and Shakespeare, and urges the reader to look to the Virgin Islands of his youth as an example, when people with all strata of social class worked to educate and cultivate themselves through intellectual endeavors: “most homes contained bookcases filled with the works of the great writers of Western literature – Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, William Shakespeare, [...], and so many others”.<sup>53</sup> Adams can thus be placed in Fanon’s first of the three phases of how a native intellectual constructs an identity, and learns to contest his colonizer:

If we wanted to trace in the works of native writers the different phases which characterize this evolution we would find spread out before us a panorama on three levels. In the first phase, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country. His inspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country. This is the period of unqualified assimilation.<sup>54</sup>

This ‘unqualified assimilation’ is further illustrated by Adams’ description of music in the Virgin Islands.

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<sup>50</sup> Adams, undated, box 1, folder 5, Alton Augustus Adams collection, The Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College Chicago.

<sup>51</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 24

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 27

<sup>53</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 22

<sup>54</sup> Fanon, “National Culture”, 222

## Culture / Music

There are few sources dedicated to the practice of music on the U.S. Virgin Islands, other than the description of Adams himself. Adams focuses on music as the backbone of a civilized society: “music was the leading component of our cultural lives”.<sup>55</sup> He then continues to describe how, in the 1850s, many classically trained European musicians visited the Virgin Islands, and how their performances were greatly enjoyed. Musical practice on the islands, as Adams describes it, was ubiquitous. He warmly remembers the musical practice at his childhood home:

After the music had finished, the men would often engage in discussions of the relative merits of the great composers, as well as the literary classics. These warm family sessions, full of good humor and revolving around the twin pillars of music and literature, were to be the overtures, the beginnings, of what was to be my career as musician and writer.<sup>56</sup>

Musical practice, according to Adams, typically revolved around church choirs and amateur ensembles.

Neville Hall, in his description of the slave society in the Virgin Islands, only mentions musical practices in relation to religious (Christian services), and, more telling, in relation to Christmas and New Year festivities, when slaves were typically granted free time. In the 1780s, there were draft laws against slave minstrelsy, and slave owners were prohibited from having their slaves play music for them. As Hall states, “It seems hardly likely that these slave musicians were performing African music on the violin for an audience of Europeans. It can safely be assumed therefore that the music was, if not European, at the very least a creolized variant of it.”<sup>57</sup> Hall furthermore provides an 1832 account of a Virgin Islander that “It is the custom here, especially among the colored persons to celebrate old year's night with music, dancing, singing and in short, making a great noise. They commenced this uproar as early as 4 o'clock in the afternoon, passing in great crowds through all the streets, crying out in their Creole tongue, 'Old year's night'”<sup>58</sup>. Slave dancing, which was improvised and in free form, contrasted starkly against the formal European dances the upper classes performed.

Adams explicitly states that, contrary to what other sources may indicate, the Virgin Islands’ musical heritage is much more influenced by European and Latin American culture

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<sup>55</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 42

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 46

<sup>57</sup> Hall, N., *Slave Society*, 117

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 117-8

than African culture, or what remained of it on Virgin Island slave plantations. Likewise, the musical instruments that are most popular, such as the guitar, violin, and a variety of woodwind instruments, are of European origin. The only distinct African influence, the ‘Bamboula’ dance, with “its distinctive polyrhythms and pulsating drumbeats” was outlawed by Danish authorities in his youth, and frowned upon by “the most refined citizens of the community.”<sup>59</sup>

Bill La Motta, a Virgin Island musician, composer, and writer, paints a different picture of traditional Virgin Island folk music in his collection and analysis of Virgin Island folk songs. The cover of the book portrays a 1863 lithograph of a Bamboula dance at a Christmas ball. Rather than ascribing the origins of Virgin Island folk music to European influences, La Motta states:

This intertwining of rhythms is one of the fascinating aspects of traditional Virgin Islands music which we historically associate with our African heritage. The only trace of Western contact is in the melodic lines which can be tied to European exposure in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. [...] In recent years ‘scratch band’ has been used to identify our native music. Any one of these four [rhythmic] patterns may be found in scratch band music, along with the use of various quaint instruments. The term was once considered low class and derogatory, due to the crudeness of sound, the raw lyrical content and unusual repetitiousness. However, it is still the true folk expression of the Virgin Islands and an important part of our cultural heritage.<sup>60</sup>

He furthermore states: “There is no stiffness evident in our folk music. It must be springy and carefree to be effective.”<sup>61</sup> This, too, contrasts with the classical European music Adams admires greatly. La Motta attempts to trace the origins of Virgin Island folk music through the etymology of musical terms, and concludes that they are most likely “the outgrowth of a patois established by attempted communication between two races”, an “entwining [of] the African dialects of the slaves and Irish and Scottish brogues of estate overseers and planters”.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, although he grew out to be of great value and importance in the Virgin Islands, musically speaking, Adams may not be a typical representative of the eclectic Virgin Island musical culture. Rather, he may be considered a product of his middle-class upbringing and education, and his personal efforts of self-improvement, which he modeled after a Western example.

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<sup>59</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 62

<sup>60</sup> Bill Lamotta and Joyce La Motta. 1980. *Virgin Islands folk songs*. 3

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 28

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 2

### Contact with the U.S.

From the outset of Western settlement on the Virgin Islands, there has been contact with North America. One major channel through which contact was established, was trade. From the early 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, with some interruptions due to several wars, North America was an important market for Virgin Island products like sugar and molasses.<sup>63</sup> Luther Zabriskie, a former U.S. consul at Saint Thomas, wrote an extensive work on the Virgin Islands after the transfer of the Virgin Islands to the United States. He aims to “convey, by photographic reproductions as well as by descriptive accounts, some idea of their more salient features in respect to natural beauty, merits as health resorts, and, especially, commercial and industrial conditions and potentialities” of the islands.<sup>64</sup> It furthermore aims to provide factual and objective information about connections between the U.S. and the Virgin Islands. However, as one book review in the *Journal History* states, although overall assessing the book positively, that

...in discussing these political and historic questions, however, the author is too brief and neglectful of important problems which the student of history would like to know. The author no doubt avoided these questions for the reasons that he then and still is in the diplomatic service of the United States.<sup>65</sup>

Zabriskie illustrates how there already was extensive contact before the U.S. naval administration was installed. For example, the Hamburg-America line provided a regular steamship connection between the Islands and the continent in 1914, and mail could be delivered once a week<sup>66</sup>. Furthermore, the majority of imported goods was American, such as drugs, different types of food, fashion, paper and paper goods.<sup>67</sup> The American dollar was accepted in many stores.<sup>68</sup> Zabriskie also talks about the use of English on the Islands: if Danish is the official language, English was the most used.<sup>69</sup> This had been the case since the first Danish settlements, as Neville Hall confirms: throughout the colonization period, due to the large variety of nationalities present on the Islands, people mostly used English to communicate. Even under Danish rule, English was used on official documents alongside Danish, as well as the newspapers that circulated on the Islands.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, Virgin

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<sup>63</sup> Dookhan, *History*, 94-6

<sup>64</sup> Luther K. Zabriskie, *The Virgin Islands of the United States of America*. 1918. vi

<sup>65</sup> "The Virgin Islands of the United States of America." *The Journal of Negro History* 3.4 (1918): 442

<sup>66</sup> Zabriskie, *The Virgin Islands*, 79

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 157

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 124

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 187-8

<sup>70</sup> Neville Hall, *Slave Society*, 13-9

Islanders were taught American history in schools. Parents who could afford it, sent their children to the mainland to study at American universities.<sup>71</sup> Maier's argument about a current existence of a "global elite oriented toward U.S. standards and values", as a result of treating higher education as an export product<sup>72</sup>, is thus at least in part applicable to the Virgin Islands, whose elites mostly had to rely on American education.

Adams' account of the years leading up to the purchase confirms Zabriskie's account, and illustrate his personal attitude towards American cultural products. Adams devotes an entire chapter to the value of an education, likely directed at the younger generations of the Virgin Islands, which he perceives to be in a crisis at the time of his writing. Thus, the reader gets an idea of the curriculum of schools: "We read mostly British writers, but it was the great American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson who was my personal favorite, and I was deeply influenced by his philosophy of individualism".<sup>73</sup> In addition to institutionalized education, which availability was only limited, many Virgin Islanders looked at the United States: "But for those of us, and there were more than a handful, who aspired to wider knowledge, the maximum use of limited local recourses was not enough. Hence, many people took correspondence coursed offered by experts in the United States and abroad."<sup>74</sup> Adams urges his younger readers to do the same, and recommends American writers to be a source of inspiration: "To get an idea of the advantages that may be derived from the pursuit of knowledge while engaged in some bread-winning activity, our young people should read the biographies of such men as Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, Booker T. Washington, James A. Garfield, Andrew Carnegie, and others."<sup>75</sup> Adams was mostly a self-taught musician, composer, and arranger. He recounts how his first music instructor, upon hearing Adams' display of his musical abilities on a self-manufactured flute "instructed me to buy a couple of sheets of blank music paper and also to buy a piccolo or flute with an instruction book from the United States".<sup>76</sup> As he progressed, Adams subscribed to American music journals such as *Etude*, and took personal correspondence courses with several professors and institutions. He ultimately received his Bachelor's degree in music from the Chicago Conservatory of Music.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Zabriskie, *The Virgin Islands*, 311

<sup>72</sup> Maier, *Among Empires*, 270.

<sup>73</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 54

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 55

<sup>75</sup> Adams. *The Memoirs*. 58

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 65

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 67

Aside from correspondence education and literature, Adams displays one other sporadic form of cultural transfer: “How well I still recall the many hours which my friend and I spend in rap Citic ecstasy listening outside residence of Mr. Alfred Mewton, a kindred spirit who was playing Sousa marches on his phonograph player.”<sup>78</sup>

In 1907, Adams became part of the first national brass band of the Danish West Indies. Soon after, in 1910, Adams founded his own brass band: The Adams Juvenile Band. As the band became increasingly successful in the Danish West Indies, Adams’ aspirations as a professional musician grew. Thus, he submitted an article to *Jacob’s Band Monthly* magazine, “the leading journal in its field on this side of the Atlantic”.<sup>79</sup> Not only was the article published, Adams was also asked to edit the magazine’s band column. This provided Adams with a large platform for his ideas, and he received recognition from many of his contemporary famous U.S. bandsmen.<sup>80</sup> Of this, Adams states:

I especially treasured Sousa’s endorsement, since he above all others was my particular idol and inspiration. This man who for more than 30 years had dominated the world of band and martial music appeared to me the epitome of all that was worthwhile in musical endeavor and achievement. The rousing Sousa marches, vibrant with their compelling rhythms, seemed the popular expression and embodiment in musical form of the Spirit of America itself. They also reflected the strong rhythmic influence and syncopation of Afro-American musical traditions - the quality that Sousa himself admitted was a characteristic feature of his compositions - and this quality, as much as anything else drew me personally to Sousa’s music.<sup>81</sup>

Notably, Adams uses the term ‘Afro-American’ to indicate the polyrhythmic character of Sousa’s compositions he is drawn to, rather than linking it to the African origins that were also present in Virgin Island cultural history. This may point to Adams’ construct of identity, which, as he points out, is formed by the cosmopolitan history of the Virgin Islands, and based on Western ideals rather than an African heritage shared with black Americans. Adam’s constructed identity as he posed himself in *Jacob’s Band Monthly* is furthermore telling of how he perceived race relations within the U.S.: for a long time, Adams was the only channel sending information to the U.S. mainland. As Clague states, “readers of *Jacob’s Band Monthly* likely would have been unaware that many on the islands, including Adams himself, were of African descent”.<sup>82</sup> Adams’ columns, unlike his colleagues, were not

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 84

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 83

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 73-85

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 84

<sup>82</sup> Clague. “Instruments of Identity”. 32.

accompanied by a portrait, nor did Adams ever explicitly reveal his ethnicity.<sup>83</sup> Adams, even before the U.S. Naval administration was installed, not only looked to the United States as an example for his musical endeavors, he also contributed to the American band music field: “Despite my geographical location a small rock in the middle of the Caribbean Sea I felt that I was part of the mainstream of international musical developments.”<sup>84</sup> However, as Adam’s omission of his racial identity illustrates, in the mainstream of American culture, he felt, was no space for a black writer .

In sum, prior to the arrival of the U.S. Naval administration, Adams’ cultural aesthetic was Western-European rather than based on an African heritage. Therefore, he should not be considered as a ‘typical’ example of a Virgin Island musician. However, due to the cosmopolitan history of the Virgin Islands, a ‘typical example’ may not be possible to find. Adams’ notion of racial identity was subordinate to class and social status. He considered upward social mobility possible through discipline and cultivation. However, he was aware that exposing his racial heritage would have a detrimental effect on reaching a large audience on the U.S. mainland as a writer and composer.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Adams. *The Memoirs*. 85

## Chapter 2 – The Arrival of the U.S. Naval Administration

This chapter aims to display the effect of the arrival of the U.S. Navy on the search for a national identity of the Virgin Islands, and to answer the question how Adam's approach to improve the Islands' socio-economic situation related to his position in the new hierarchical structure, especially in comparison to other, more radical, social leaders. The mechanisms of an American Empire 'by invitation' at work are displayed, particularly how pre-existing hierarchical structures of race were transported onto the 'new periphery'. This chapter will aim to answer the following questions: What were the attitudes of the U.S. and the Virgin Islands, respectively, towards the incorporation of the new U.S. territory? How were racial hierarchical structures of the U.S. imposed on the Virgin Islands? How did Adams and his U.S.V.I. Navy band negotiate with these racial forces?

### The Purchase

The Danish West Indies' economy was at its peak in the 1830s. In the years following, the islands increasingly became a liability for Denmark. Its trade profits declined rapidly as a result of technological improvements, which allowed ships to travel from Europe to Central America without having to stop at the Virgin Islands.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, the islands suffered a series of hurricanes. Thus, Denmark was interested in the 1867 U.S. offer to purchase the Virgin Islands.<sup>86</sup> The offer was initiated by Secretary of State William Seward, who looked to protect the United States against European powers.<sup>87</sup> Dookhan describes the attitudes of the white population on the West Indies:

The vote in St. Thomas was taken on January 9, 1868 and in St. John on the following day. In St. Thomas, the vote was 1039 for and only 22 against the Treaty; in saint John, it was 205 for and none against. The voting was conducted in mid much expression of patriotism in favor of The United States.<sup>88</sup>

The sale, however, lacked support in U.S. congress, which had to deal with more pressing matters, such as the impeachment of President Johnson. Ultimately, after some extensions, the deadline for ratification of the sale was not met, and Demark dropped the matter.<sup>89</sup> A

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<sup>85</sup> Kupcok. "Cultural Highlights" 215

<sup>86</sup> Jeannette Bastian. "A question of custody: The colonial archives of the United States Virgin Islands." *The American Archivist* 64.1 (2001): 96-114.

<sup>87</sup> Halvdan Koht. "The Origin of Seward's Plan to Purchase the Danish West Indies." *The American Historical Review* 50.4 (1945): 762-767.

<sup>88</sup> Dookhan, *History*, 253.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* 253-7

second attempt to purchase the West Indies, in 1892, was stopped by the Danish government in 1903.<sup>90</sup>

That year, American scholar Albert Keller published a study on the Danish West Indies. "Under present conditions, it is of special interest to Americans to know what value the Danes really set upon their west Indian Islands before there was any definite prospect in sight for their sale." He states that the colonization was mostly an effort to imitate other European powers, and, because of the limited prospects of economical profit, was an "artificial movement": "True colonization in the West Indies was clearly beyond the strength of Denmark [...]. The mother country was too remote in to small the competition of greater peoples was too strong. A decision to part with the islands would seem to be the conclusion of wisdom, and considerations of national pride alone can oppose it."<sup>91</sup> Its economic decline followed "the order of a natural and inevitable evolution".<sup>92</sup> This could represent the impartial attitude of the U.S. public towards the incorporation of the Virgin Islands in its nation. The attempted sale did not receive much coverage in newspapers.<sup>93</sup> One article in the New York Times states: "We can perfectly afford to possess our souls in patience, in view of the loss of the Danish Legislature by tie vote of the treaty in accordance with which Denmark would have unloaded what to her is and always will be a liability, but what in our hands would be an asset."<sup>94</sup>

Over the next years, the social and economic situation on the Virgin Islands worsened.<sup>95</sup> World War I had detrimental effects on trade, and social tensions worsened as a result of various labor strikes.<sup>96</sup> The U.S. showed a renewed interest in obtaining the Virgin Islands to prevent Germany placing a naval base there, and Denmark accepted the offer. Thus, on March 31<sup>st</sup> 1917, the Danish West Indies became the U.S. Virgin Islands.<sup>97</sup> As Clague puts it: "The United States and its naval administrators inherited a territory with few prospects and many problems, including an underdeveloped infrastructure (roads, sanitation),

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<sup>90</sup> Bastian. "Question of Custody". 100.

<sup>91</sup> Albert G. Keller. "Notes on the Danish West Indies." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 22, no. 1 (1903): 109.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 99-110.

<sup>93</sup> Database: <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

<sup>94</sup> "THE DANISH WEST INDIES." Editorial. *The New York Times* 25 Oct. 1902: n. pag. - *View Article*. Web. 14 June 2016.

<sup>95</sup> "A Brief History of the Danish West Indies, 1666-1917." *Virgin Island History*. Danish National Archives, n.d. Web. 14 June 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Norwell Harrigan, and Pearl I. Varlack. "The US Virgin Islands and the black experience." *Journal of Black Studies* 7.4 (1977): 393.

<sup>97</sup> "Brief History". Danish National Archives.

poor health care, and a failing and underfunded educational system.”<sup>98</sup> Virgin Island historian Jarvis says: “There was a full-grown social and economic problem rearing on its haunches, kicking, snorting and waiting for the cowboy with rope and saddle”.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, Virgin Islanders looked to the U.S. for “emergency relief”.<sup>100</sup>, expecting, in addition to financial support from the U.S. government, to receive U.S. citizenship, and its rights and privileges. An article in *The Bulletin*, a leading Virgin Island newspaper, states:

We are taken under the Stars and Stripes, not as a conquered people, neither do we expect to be treated as such. We have for these many years enjoyed the rights of a free and enlightened people, and of this freedom we expect no curtailment whatever. We shall give our loyalty unstintedly to the flag that now floats over us. From this moment on it is our flag and in every respect we demand every privilege, all the rights, and all the protection for which it stands. There are some things which make the transfer of these islands easy. First, there is the language. In this there is no difficulty whatever, for without a single exception English, or, if you will have it, American, is the tongue of the people; next, the close commercial relations which have always existed between the States and these islands; and thirdly, the large number of the islanders who have taken the States for a home, and these seem to be factors which will save a problem.<sup>101</sup>

Indeed, a construct of America, and what it meant to be an American had reached the Virgin Islands long before the Naval administration through years of contact.<sup>102</sup>

The United States was no stranger to us. We knew about the nation and what it stood for from books, newspapers, magazines, and the telegraph. A good many natives had gone to the states to take advantage of the economic and educational opportunities offered there. From these immigrants, those remaining on the islands received not only monthly remittances but also stories about the advantages of life under the American flag. Above all, our contact with America came through her ships and sailors who visited our harbor. Mariners from all nations came to St. Thomas, but during my youth the Americans were far and away the best liked and most imitated. People try to walk and speak like Americans and when you move through the streets of old Charlotte Amalie, it was as if you were in a town on the east coast. We admired the American character, which was individualistic, easygoing, and freedom loving – not unlike our own.<sup>103</sup>

This characterization of American culture complies with how many scholars have described the image of America abroad. For example, Reinhold Wagnleiter, although describing the

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<sup>98</sup> Adams. *The Memoirs*. 86.

<sup>99</sup> Qtd. In Harrigan, "Black Experience." 394.

<sup>100</sup> Adams. *The Memoirs*. 92.

<sup>101</sup> Qtd. in Zabriskie, *The Virgin Islands*, 453.

<sup>102</sup> Clague. "The Navy Band". 23

<sup>103</sup> Adams. *The Memoirs*. 91.

U.S. in another context, names it ‘The Empire of the Fun’.<sup>104</sup> The emulation of perceived typical American traits was continued after the purchase:

St. Thomians who have traditionally competed with each other in personal appearance have taken up the American Negro practice of straightening the hair. Beauty shops have sprung up all over town during the last few years. The young people try to outdo each other in their knowledge of American slang.<sup>105</sup>

However, the U.S. was not solely regarded as ‘the land of freedom’. Indeed, as Adams states: “A small clique was also anxious because of America’s racial policies, which were considered far harsher than anything we had experienced under the Danes.”<sup>106</sup> The Danish administration had no official recognition of race. Rather, there were sharp class distinctions, which to a large extent corresponded with skin color, but different skin tones other than ‘white’ were regarded separately. Albert Campbell, in a 1940 cultural anthropological study, which he describes as an “attempt of a psychologist to analyze the situation and behavior adjustments of a small Negro community on the West Indian island of St. Thomas”<sup>107</sup>, confirms the different approach of the U.S. Navy regarding race:

“The navy also introduced a consciousness of race which had been relatively latent under the Danes. Where the Danes had drawn sharp distinctions between the different classes and shades of color within the native group, the navy tended to lump all of the colored natives into one group. The positions and preferment which they distributed among the natives were much less influenced by an interest in class or color than would have been the case with the Danes.”<sup>108</sup>

The U.S. officials, most of whom of southern origin, were “for the most part thoroughly imbued with the characteristic credo regarding race. Anthony Jarvis describes how, from the first night the U.S. marines came ashore onwards, there were several incidents of racist abuse: “the negroes felt the heel of race prejudice, for one of the ‘leathernecks’ kicked an inoffensive black man into a deep gutter to the accompaniment of sulphurous language slurring his parentage and color”.<sup>109</sup> The class division, however, provided a way for the U.S. administrators to carry out their racialized notions without much trouble.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Wagnleitner, Reinhold. "The Empire of the Fun, or Talkin'Soviet Union Blues: The Sound of Freedom and US Cultural Hegemony in Europe." *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 3 (1999): 499-524.

<sup>105</sup> Campbell. “St. Thomas Negroes”. 80.

<sup>106</sup> Adams. *The Memoirs*. 91.

<sup>107</sup> Albert A Campbell. "St. Thomas Negroes—a study of personality and culture." *Psychological Monographs* 55.5 (1943): 1

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 77

<sup>109</sup> Qtd. In Harrigan, "Black Experience." 396.

<sup>110</sup> Campbell. “St. Thomas Negroes”. 80.

Contrary to what the local inhabitants of the Virgin Islands hoped for and expected, they would not become subjects of the U.S. Constitution for another decade. The Virgin Islands were an ‘unincorporated territory’ of the United States, and in effect, the Danish governors were replaced by American officials, but Danish colonial law continued.<sup>111</sup> Shortly after the transfer, the United States entered World War I, which, ultimately, seemed to be the chief motivation for the purchase of the territory.<sup>112</sup> An article appeared in the 1917 *Journal of Negro History*, which states: “As more than ninety per cent of their 27.000 inhabitants are Negroes, the American people, upon whom devolves the duty of shaping the destiny of these new subjects, will doubtless be interested in learning more about them”.<sup>113</sup> However, little attention was paid to the purchase in regular newspapers, and always in relation to the war, and the Islands’ strategic position near the Panama canal. One newspaper, for example, states: “Senator Kenyon declared the United States got possession of the Virgin Islands in time and wisely because the Germans had design on them.”<sup>114</sup> Another newspaper article states: “The people of the Virgin Islands feel that they have been neglected by the United States; that when the American flag went up in the Virgin Islands it should have been followed by American laws, customs and ideals as soon as possible.”<sup>115</sup> *Crisis* magazine, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), only briefly mentions the incorporation of an American territory with predominantly black inhabitants.<sup>116</sup>

Although some improvements were noticed, living conditions on the Virgin Islands remained poor.<sup>117</sup> When, in 1931, the first civilian governor was installed, he “was amazed to discover the abject poverty of the islanders. Fourteen years of annual reports had never discussed this.”<sup>118</sup>

### **An instrument of identity: The U.S. Virgin Island Naval Band.**

In his study on Adams and his band, Mark Clague explains how the lack of real social and political change under the U.S. Naval administration sparked active resistance of several

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<sup>111</sup> Clague. “The Navy Band”. 23.

<sup>112</sup> Dookhan, *History*, 266

<sup>113</sup> Leila Amos Pendleton. "Our New Possessions-The Danish West Indies." *The Journal of Negro History* 2.3 (1917): 267-288.

<sup>114</sup> "The Washington Times. (Washington [D.C.]) 1902-1939, April 24, 1919, FINAL EDITION, 17." *News about Chronicling America* RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 July 2016.

<sup>115</sup> "The Jasper News. (Jasper, Mo.) 1898-1924, October 02, 1919, Image 10." *News about Chronicling America* RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 June 2016.

<sup>116</sup> "The Horizon: Social Progress." *Crisis* Apr. 1917: 294-300. Web. 03 Aug. 2016.

<sup>117</sup> “Brief History”. Danish National Archives.

<sup>118</sup> Mark Kurlansky. "A continent of islands: Searching for the Caribbean destiny." (1992). 257.

local black leaders, who through newspaper publications and the formation of labor unions pressed for social change and self-rule.<sup>119</sup>

Music was the rhetorical tool that Adams used to persuade the navy to enable his cultural work and to reinforce the identity of the local inhabitants as Virgin Islanders. Taking advantage of his position as bandmaster of the Adams Juvenile band, he filled the void of local identity with music.<sup>120</sup>

Interestingly, two of the social leaders, Rothschild Francis and Lionel Roberts, also were brass band leaders prior to the transfer, serving as their conductors, teachers, and organizers. Clague aptly calls the bands ‘instruments of identity’.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, on de Virgin Islands, music was an important aspect of community life, and bands were used not only to educate its members musically, but also to instill in them the morals of discipline and hard work. Furthermore, bands played an exemplary role in the community.<sup>122</sup>

Aside from his activities as a musician, Adams had also taken up journalism. Together with David Hamilton Jackson, who later would actively resist the U.S. administration, Adams worked for the *Herald*, the first independent newspaper of the Virgin Islands, mainly concerned with advocating the labor union.<sup>123</sup> Thus, he became an increasingly visible and respected member of the Virgin Island community.

Adams recalls how, after she witnessed a concert of Adams’ Juvenile Band, Mrs. White, the wife of a U.S. captain, promoted the idea of installing a navy band with her husband:

She believed that the band could play a valuable role as liaison – a bridge of communication – between the new naval officials and the community. [...] She was well aware of the beneficial role that music can play in community development as a facilitator of cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, as well as a means of demonstrating the need and value of cooperation, unity, and harmony.<sup>124</sup>

Three months after the transfer, the U.S. Navy appointed Adams as its first black bandleader. Adams was free to choose his band members, and was waived of any sea duty requirements.<sup>125</sup> Rather, the band was employed solely as a musical and social organization. Adams was very grateful for the opportunity granted by the navy, and felt responsible for its success: “We had to justify the Navy’s faith in us. We had to prove our worth by doing an

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<sup>119</sup> Clague. “The Navy Band”. 23.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 24

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 66-83.

<sup>123</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 88.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>125</sup> Floyd, “Alton Augustus Adams”, 175.

exemplary job, because we represented not only the Virgin Islands but also the entire colored race.”<sup>126</sup> As Adams further states, “The band became an effective mediator between the ideals of the U.S. administrators and those of the people.”<sup>127</sup> Members of the band were encouraged to “become actively and constructively involved in community affairs”.<sup>128</sup> Thus, Adams worked on the opening of the first public library on St. Thomas, and co-founded a newspaper: the *St. Thomas Times*, which was “owned, operated, and printed by the navy band”.<sup>129</sup> The newspaper was published from 1921-1923. In his memoirs, Adams states that the newspaper was not intended as a political platform, but rather to uplift its readers through cultivation and education, and to report on community affairs. Yet, as Adams also states, “the *Times* also promoted the ideals of American democracy, good citizenship, and true patriotism”.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, the newspaper, although stated to refrain from politicizing, indisputably conveyed an attitude much in favor of America and the American administration. A 1922 editorial declared:

Captain White, whose name is a household word in these islands, beloved and trusted by one and all whose fatherly care to us bandsmen has helped to implant in us that great yearning for American ideals, believed that we as musicians could help in a great measure to further implant the seeds of Americanism in these islands.

...

We found that to be a true American, was to be a patriot. [...] our duty is plainly to carry upward and onward that spirit of patriotism, [...] for on that our standard of Americanism will be defined.”

...

We believe implicitly in the earnestness and honesty of the Administration of these islands.<sup>131</sup>

Adams’ patriotism towards his new home country was not solely expressed in his written statements. His compositions, both in style and in title, illustrate a strong Western aesthetic. He has repeatedly stated that John Philip Sousa, a famous composer of band music in the U.S., was his greatest inspiration.<sup>132</sup> In the years following the transfer to the United States, Adams composed several band pieces, of which three became particularly popular both within the Virgin Islands and on the U.S. mainland, where they were performed by the bands of famous leaders John Sousa, Edwin Franko Goldman, and Herbert Clarke. His most famous

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<sup>126</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 96

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 103

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 104

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 107

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. 108

<sup>131</sup> Qtd in Adams, *The Memoirs*. 108-10.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

work, “The Virgin Island March” was composed in 1917, and dedicated to Captain White.<sup>133</sup> It would become the territorial anthem of the Virgin Islands. The song is very cheerful, and to the listener, apart from the title, in no way indicates its Caribbean origin. Both “The Governor’s Own” and “Spirit of the United States Navy” are dedicated to U.S. officials: Governor Oman and President Coolidge, respectively.<sup>134</sup>

The Congress of the United States approved a report that declared:

One of the best pieces of work done by the Navy has been the development of a splendid band [...]. These young men in the bands are moral, enterprising, and set a good example to the other young men of the islands. There is a great ambition among them to become members of the bands.<sup>135</sup>

Although the reciprocal appreciation of Adams for the U.S. Naval administration was likely used as an example of goodwill and an illustration of a desired cooperation between the U.S. and the Virgin Islands, there were many Virgin Islanders who looked for a national identity elsewhere, and were highly critical of the U.S. administration, who, in their opinion, did not sufficiently address the social and economic problems of the Virgin Islands, which had come to be known as ‘the American Poorhouse’.<sup>136</sup> Indeed, because of the economic dependency on the United States, revolutionary movements never realized their opposition.<sup>137</sup> As Dookhan states:

In their search for identity under the United States Virgin Islands reformers left no stone unturned, but the naval officers they were dealing with were powerful and highly disciplined men who had full backing from their superiors in Washington and who, as a consequence, did not move if they did not want to. They attacked quietly and surely with every means at their disposal. Their actions were ultimately successful in delaying political reform, although in the short term they provoked even fiercer opposition.<sup>138</sup>

Adams was criticized for his compliancy with the U.S. Navy, and became a controversial figure on the Virgin Islands.<sup>139</sup> He was not entirely indifferent towards the animosity, yet, as he states in his memoirs, his idea of establishing social change was through cooperation, rather than opposition. One of Adams’ critics was Caspar Holstein, a Virgin Island native who moved to New York, where he made his fortune in the illegal lottery ‘the numbers

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<sup>133</sup> Floyd, “Alton Augustus Adams”, 180.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Qtd in Adams, *The Memoirs*. 101.

<sup>136</sup> “Brief History”. Danish National Archives.

<sup>137</sup> Roopnarine. “Social Identity” 797

<sup>138</sup> Qtd. in Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Clague, “The Navy Band”. 49.

racket'. Holstein was very vocal about his objections to the Naval Administration, writing several articles on how domestic American racism was exported to the Virgin Islands.<sup>140</sup>

Adams stated about this that “although he and Caspar Holstein ‘may dream of the same good things for the Virgin Islands, our methods of dealing with local problems are [...] diametrically opposed’”.<sup>141</sup>

In conclusion, The U.S. did not have a strong opinion on its new territory. Rather, it was perceived as a diplomatic asset. It imposed its domestic racial vision on the islands, which was facilitated by the correspondence, to an extent, of skin color and social status. The Virgin Islanders hoped that incorporation with the U.S. territory would grant them, aside from an improvement in living conditions, the freedom and rights that were perceived as quintessential American. Instead, they encountered structural racism they had not faced since the abolition of slavery. Thus, apart from being placed into a territorial periphery, they experienced a new social marginalization. Adams negotiated with these new structures through cooperation, rather than opposition. He placed himself close to the center by expressing his loyalty through style of music, and in his writing, which catered to white American audiences. Using publicity and visibility as a tool, he obtained agency as a black Virgin Islander, which allowed him to stimulate social change.

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<sup>140</sup> Robert Philipson. "The Harlem Renaissance as Postcolonial Phenomenon." *African American Review* 40, no. 1 (2006): 145.

<sup>141</sup> Qtd. in Clague, "The Navy Band". 51.

## Chapter 3 – Black Transnationalism in the Harlem Renaissance and the U.S.V.I. Navy Band Goodwill Tour of 1924

Chapters 1 and 2 have mostly focused on the American influence on notions of race and identity in the Virgin Islands, expressed through culture. This chapter will consider the effect of the significant presence of a heterogeneous black Caribbean community in New York on the Harlem Renaissance, and how Alton Augustus Adams relates to the New Negro movement: Adams toured the United States primarily as a Virgin Islander, to him, his skin color was of less importance than his ethnicity. His contact with black Americans had been limited, and as will be shown, he had adopted ‘white American’ ideas of the black American minority. Adam’s tour moved him from the periphery to the center in a geographical sense, yet, culturally, from the center, namely an elite Virgin Islander, to the periphery; a black man in America. This chapter aims to answer: To what extent did the Pan-Africanist ideas of the Harlem Renaissance instill a black American race-consciousness in Adams? How was the tour used to serve the objectives of the African American community on the U.S. mainland, and by the U.S.V.I Naval administration, respectively? What personal purpose can be deducted from Adams’ accounts of the tour?

### **The West Indies in the Harlem Renaissance**

In July 1900, W.E.B. DuBois gave a speech at the Pan-African conference in Paris:

In the metropolis of the modern world, in this closing year of the nineteenth century there has been assembled a congress of men and women of African blood, to deliberate solemnly upon the present situation and outlook of the darker races of mankind. The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the question as to how far differences of race [...] are going to be made, hereafter, the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization.<sup>142</sup>

In his essay on the practice of African diaspora, Brent Hayes Edwards emphasizes the importance of DuBois’ phrase ‘the color line’. DuBois would repeatedly state how “the ‘Negro problem’ in the United States is only a ‘local phase’ of a much greater problem: ‘the color line belts the world’”. Alain Locke, in his famous work *The New Negro*, states how, in part, ‘New’ refers to their new internationalism.<sup>143</sup> The intellectual movement of the Harlem

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<sup>142</sup> Qtd. in Brent Hayes Edwards. "The Practice of Diaspora." *American Studies: An Anthology*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 33-40.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

Renaissance is now often mainly considered an American movement, yet, the influence of a significant minority of black immigrants should not be overlooked.

After the acquisition of the Virgin Islands by the U.S., migrating to the mainland became easier. Furthermore, due to the prohibition laws, which greatly hampered the trade in rum from the Virgin Islands, many Virgin Islanders were forced to move.<sup>144</sup> W.A. Domingo, a prominent writer of the Harlem Renaissance, and from the Caribbean himself, stated that between 1920 and 1923, the number of black immigrants in the U.S. increased by almost 40%. A great number of those immigrants resided in Harlem, New York.<sup>145</sup> Domingo:

Here they have their first contact with each other, with large numbers of American Negroes, and with the American brand of race prejudice. Divided by tradition, culture, historical background and group perspective, these diverse peoples are gradually hammered into a loose unit by the impersonal force of congested residential segregation.<sup>146</sup>

In his study of what he calls the ‘Caribbean Destiny’, Mark Kurlansky describes the tensions between African Americans and black immigrants from the Caribbean:

There were tensions between black Americans and black Caribbeans in America. Black Americans who had been fighting since emancipation for jobs, opportunities, and social benefits, uneasily watched immigrants cutting into their meager pie. The immigrants were not even humble about it. Black Americans called them ‘snobbish’.<sup>147</sup>

W.A. Domingo argues that, because in their home nations, “racial barriers to economic success” were less present, “black immigrants were more persistent and ambitious in their occupational hazard”.<sup>148</sup> He furthermore states that West Indians made up a relatively large percentage in ‘white’ professions, counter to black Americans, who mainly chose professions in which there was no competition with white Americans.<sup>149</sup> However, these observations may have been caused simply by the fact that the high cost of transport allowed only the more economically affluent, educated, and skilled Virgin Islanders to move.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> W.A. Domingo. “Gift of the Black Tropics”. *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*. Rutgers University Press, (2001) 90-103.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid 91.

<sup>146</sup> Domingo, “Gift”. 90.

<sup>147</sup> Mark Kurlansky. *A Continent Of Islands: Searching for the Caribbean Destiny*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing. (1992) 234.

<sup>148</sup> Suzanne Model. “Caribbean immigrants: A black success story?”. *International Migration Review* (1991): 249.

<sup>149</sup> W.A. Domingo. “The Tropics of New York”.

<sup>150</sup> Louis J Parascandola. *Look For Me All Around You: Anglophone Caribbean Immigrants in the Harlem Renaissance*. Wayne State University Press, (2005)

Indeed, while not feeling related to black Americans, black immigrants were nevertheless categorized in the same group by the dominant white majority, and excluded from that majority they, in some cases, felt socially closer to than to the black American community:

The Caribbeans, even from the lower classes, did not immigrate to the United States only to be a part of the most denigrated group of the country. In addition to the tension with Black Americans, Caribbeans were deeply resentful of the attitudes of white Americans. Derek Walcott said: "I live in America. In America I'm a black man, steadily from day to day I don't think about it, but you encounter a glance."<sup>151</sup>

In his novel *Home to Harlem*, Claude McKay illustrates how the marginalization of the dominant white class introduced a sense of alliance with black Americans:

It was race that bound him to men and women with whom he shared no other bond: "He remembered when little Hayti was floundering uncontrolled, how proud he was to be the son of a free nation. He used to feel condescendingly sorry for those poor African natives; superior to ten millions of suppressed Yankee 'coons/ Now he was just one of them and he hated them for being one of them. . ."<sup>152</sup>

Thus, the 'double consciousness' DuBois spoke of, referring to the notion that black Americans encountered – being at once black, or 'the other' in the eyes of white America, and yet simultaneously part of that American culture – was perhaps an even more entangled circumstance for black immigrants. Yet, as many scholars currently argue, their influence on the Harlem Renaissance must not be underestimated.<sup>153</sup> Black immigrants were, as Louis J. Parascandola states, very active in politics and writing, both journalism and literature. They brought with them a transnational point of view, which in turn inspired an international perspective in the Harlem Renaissance:<sup>154</sup>

### **Adams' race consciousness**

Black leaders answered the question how to uplift the black race in several ways. In her book *The Narrative of the Negro*, which was written just before the Harlem Renaissance took flight, Leila Amos Pendleton distinguishes between "two great schools of negro thought", which she describes as the conservative and the radical thinkers.

Briefly stated, the Conservative school of thinkers lays most stress upon the opportunities and privileges which Negroes enjoy in this country, while the Radicals insist upon the rights of which we are deprived. Each side is most intensely in earnest

<sup>151</sup> Kulansky. *A Continent*. 234.

<sup>152</sup> Qtd in Robert Philipson. "The Harlem Renaissance as Postcolonial Phenomenon." *African American Review* 40, no. 1 (2006): 155.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. 145.

<sup>154</sup> Parascandola. *Look For Me* 11.

and both seek the highest good of the Negro. The difference seems to lie in opinion as to how this highest good is to be secured.<sup>155</sup>

She exemplifies the two schools of thought by tying each one to a prominent black American. The conservative school would be best represented by Booker T. Washington, who in his famous 1895 speech for the opening of the Atlanta exposition, urges his listeners to ‘cast down [their] buckets where they are’, and make use of the opportunities that are already available to them, rather than pressure for social change: “The wisest of my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing.”<sup>156</sup> In contrast, the radical school of thinkers, of which W.E.B. DuBois was regarded an apt spokesperson, advocated for equal civil rights and social change. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “any Black who dared to aspire to full equality with Whites was branded a radical”.<sup>157</sup>

In his memoirs, Adams does not explicitly address the matter of race extensively. However, his actions, along with Clague’s analyses, reflect how his notions of race were shaped by both his background as a ‘cosmopolitan’ Virgin Islander with high regard for the Danish rulers, and dominant American concepts of race. Adams, prior to travelling to the United States mainland, had not had much, if any, contact with black Americans. In fact, from some of his expressions it can be deduced that he adopted the racial notions of his white legislators. For example, in his account of the first time he met black American intellectuals, who were excluded from the band’s public concerts, and had petitioned to organize a black-sponsored lawn party early in his 1924 goodwill tour in Norfolk, Virginia, he states:

We were warmly received and lavishly entertained as champions of the race. That affair was a real eye-opener for me, since it provided me with my first experience with the professional caliber, the cultivation, the achievements and the dignified character of the colored middle class in the United States. Like many islanders, I had a highly stereotyped view of the American Negro, as a down-trodden, indolent menial, unable to rise above his former slave status. As we mingled and conversed with the urbane, intelligent attendees and learned of their appreciation of fine music, my men and I were compelled to revise our unwarranted feelings of superiority.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Leila Amos Pendleton. *A Narrative of the Negro*. Washington, D.C.: Press of RL Pendleton, 1912. 189.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.* 194

<sup>157</sup> Parascandola. *Look For Me* 13.

<sup>158</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 128.

However, as Clague points out, this account may have been adjusted in order to achieve a greater effect with the readership of his memoirs, as indeed, Adams had expressed such realizations before: In 1922, Adams for the first time set foot on the U.S. mainland, during a trip that allowed him to study methods of musical instruction, knowledge that he would apply to the program he constructed for the public schools on St. Thomas.<sup>159</sup><sup>160</sup> He recalls meeting both black and white Americans, the latter of whom, at a time when “the race question was quite acute”, nevertheless warmly received him in their homes, where pictures of black musicians were displayed along with white musicians.<sup>161</sup> Additionally, he recalls his first meeting with W.E.B. DuBois, with whom he later would become close friends, and who he would receive in his home on the Virgin Islands:

It was in the summer of 1922, on my first trip to the United States, that I met Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, then editor of *The Crisis* and the acknowledged spokesman of the Negro intelligentsia in the United States. The introduction was made by Harry Watt, a native Virgin Islander living in New York City. Our interview was, however, quite different from those of other outstanding Negroes I had met previously. He was cold and informal, his manner almost bordering the rude. I did not, however, feel hurt, but disappointment. I immediately sensed that this behavior resulted from the fact that I had brought with me, and presented publicly, a different attitude toward race relations – one which existed in the Virgin Islands under both Danish and American sovereignty.<sup>162</sup>

Adams was, perhaps, not considered ‘radical’ enough in his methods for uplifting the black race, which were more in line with the ‘cast down your bucket’ sentiment Booker T. Washington expressed. In a 1923 speech that was published in the *St Thomas Times*, Adams uses Washington as an example of what people can achieve through “the two qualities that spell success – Talent and Industry”.<sup>163</sup> Clague contends that another reason for the neglect may have been that Adams’ presence would underline the different ethnicities within the black community, which “might have been counter to the construction of an undifferentiated, unified, and therefore powerful, black identity”<sup>164</sup>. However, as Edwards states in his study, it is exactly the paradox of differentiation and unification which DuBois addresses and values in his book *The Color Line*.

Whatever the underlying reason, Adams’ first trip in the United States was hardly covered in the major black publications. Only after his return to the Virgin Islands, a column

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<sup>159</sup> Clague. “Instruments” 48

<sup>160</sup> Floyd, “Alton Augustus Adams”, 176

<sup>161</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 112.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. 268.

<sup>163</sup> CBMR archive

<sup>164</sup> Clague. “Instruments” 48.

by Romeo L. Dougherty in the *New York Amsterdam News*, a black newspaper, was dedicated to his visit, and *The Crisis*, of which DuBois was the editor, was scolded for the lack of attention that had been paid to Adams:

Some months ago came to our land a stranger. Not only did he come to inhale a breath of the inspiring wind which has made America what she is today, but to bring a message to our colored musicians, who received him in a manner worthy of those men of the old school in distant lands whose contributions to the world of music will for ages to come inspire ambitious youth [...]. He had to face a narrow environment and patiently bide the time when the stars and stripes would open wide the doors even to men of color in this distant land of which we speak.

Assiduously he studied. [There were] no universities to confer degrees upon him but he was unto himself a teacher, a genius recognized by the governors sent to rule his people by America, and soon he wore the chevrons of the only Negro bandmaster in the United States Navy. [...] Met and welcomed by the leading musicians, legislators, and people in every walk of life, the warm reception tendered him sent him back to his island home with a heart bounding with gratitude and deeper love for his brothers in black here in the United States and one would imagine that for a minute America's so-called cultured leader of the near-whites would at least make mention in his *Crisis Magazine* of Alton A. Adams [...].<sup>165</sup>

It is noteworthy how Mr. Dougherty, addressing a marginalized group within the United States, clearly positions the U.S. in the center, and the Virgin Islands in the periphery. It is taken up by the 'benevolent empire' America, which enables people to cultivate themselves. The belief of Manifest Destiny, and the notion that Adams is a foreigner rather than a fellow citizen, seemingly prevails in this instance.

### **The 1924 Goodwill Tour**

Having acquired acclaim in the band music scene, The U.S.V.I. Navy band was sent to tour the mainland in 1924. The tour was advocated as a way to promote American tourism to the Virgin Islands, in order to boost their economy. An unidentified U.S. newspaper states:

The tour was for the object of advertising the islands – which are our possessions – to the people of the United States, as healthful tourists resorts during the winter months; and the opinion seems to be general that if these islands are nearly as good as the music their land discourses, they are indeed worth seeing and helping.<sup>166</sup>

Yet, the tour may not have only been purposed to create goodwill on the U.S. mainland, but also amongst the U.S. Virgin Islanders, by sending out the message that indeed, a black Virgin Islander was sent out to proudly promote their community, and to show their

<sup>165</sup> Floyd, "Alton Augustus Adams". 177.

<sup>166</sup> Adams, undated, box 7, Alton Augustus Adams collection, The Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College Chicago.

eagerness to make positive changes to their economy. Adams was sent to Washington in advance, in order to make arrangements for the tour. There, however, he not only met with naval officials, but also made his own arrangements with leaders of black communities.<sup>167</sup> Thus, Adams added his own goal to the tour: uplifting the black race through a display of cultivation and sophistication.

As only the wealthy could afford to go on holiday to the Virgin Islands, it is not surprising that the band played on many occasions for white audiences. To those audiences, the only elements that distinguished Adams' band from mainstream U.S. bands, was their skin color, and the titles of the pieces: "We were told by many in the audience that several of our listeners were under the impression that we came to amuse them with jazz music, but this impression, to their hearty delight, was soon dispelled by the rendition of the program outlined above."<sup>168</sup> The program, its official part, contained a mix of Adams' own compositions, one of which was the famous Virgin Islands' March, and other famous band music by Western composers.<sup>169</sup> Thus, aside from drawing attention to the Virgin Islands as a holiday destination, Adams also conveyed the message that Virgin Island culture was as sophisticated as U.S. mainstream culture. This is reflected by a reaction Adams received on a radio show on which the band was featured: "Your program [...] did more to put the Virgin Islands on the map than anything since they passed under the government of the United States. [...] You have therefore raised our estimate of the people there, by showing us their taste in music."<sup>170</sup>

With the help from black leaders and Virgin Island communities in the larger cities along the East Coast, Adams and his band played many concerts that were freely admissible, and often performed at public spaces.<sup>171</sup> Thus, they aimed to reach a large audience. The concerts were a huge success, and received much attention within the black communities.<sup>172</sup> Most notable is the concert series the band performed in New York, which illustrates the presence of a large Virgin Island community. Adams, on his most memorable concert of the tour, in Harlem:

[...] when we started our march up to Seventh Avenue to St. Nicholas Park, we found a massive audience lining the sidewalks for blocks, awaiting us with bated breath and smiling faces. We were cheered and applauded wildly as we marched proudly by. After we passed, members of the crowd joined the happy procession to the bandstand.

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<sup>167</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 125

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.* 129.

<sup>169</sup> Clague. "Instruments". 42-3.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

<sup>171</sup> Adams. *The Memoirs*. 123-141.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

If delirious, spontaneous joy was ever evidenced in any people, it was in those who filled to overflowing St. Nicholas Park on the day of our concert. The Virgin Islanders who did not attend were very few. The aged, the decrepit, the invalid were there, cheering along with everyone else every number on the program.<sup>173</sup>

After the concert, the crowds caused ‘uneasiness’ with the local police force, but Adams does not elaborate on this further than stating they simply had to wait until the excitement subdued. An article in the *New York Amsterdam News* states: “The band has won its way into the hearts of colored Americans, and nothing is being left undone to show the high appreciation of the people for their ability.” Adams continues:

The concert, and those that followed, meant much to the people of Harlem, for, besides the music, and the relationship, they realized that what we were doing was just vindication of their true status in the cultured part of the human family. I will always remember one man screaming during the explosion of joy that erupted after the concert: ‘Yes. Yes. Let them find out from this that we are not monkey chasers’.<sup>174</sup>

Counter to the occasions where the band performed for white audiences, the most appreciated part of the program were the ‘unofficial’ encores, which were arrangements of Caribbean dance music.<sup>175</sup>

Adams further notes that “the band’s tour also helped further understanding within the black community itself – notably between West Indians and African Americans, bringing these groups into conversation and inspiring a shared pride.”<sup>176</sup> Furthermore, the tour also unified the Virgin Islanders living on the U.S. mainland. An interesting example is that Caspar Holstein, who criticized Adams’ methods of achieving social change on the Virgin Islands, funded a concert in New York with the money he had made from organizing illegal lotteries, something Adams did not support, but, in the interest of their common cause, condoned.<sup>177</sup> Adams also met again with W.E.B. DuBois, who, this time, was far more cordial.

I believe that the band – its music and its positive reception – accounted for this change. Our music and bearing had spoken both eloquently and forcibly about our native sense of pride and self-esteem. [...] I was certainly happy about the change, for DuBois had been an early inspiration to me as well as other Virgin Islanders and West Indians.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 132-3.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. 133.

<sup>175</sup> Clague. “Instruments”. 39.

<sup>176</sup> Adams. *The Memoirs*. 124.

<sup>177</sup> Clague. “Instruments”. 39.

<sup>178</sup> Adams. *The Memoirs*. 268.

Thus, the tour served multiple purposes, targeted by several parties. For the U.S. Naval administration, it was a way to show its good intentions, to display their racial tolerance, and to boost the Virgin Islands' economy. For the black communities on the U.S. mainland, the band's performance, and its good reception amongst both white and black audiences was a way to display the abilities of black people. The band's success contributed to a positive black consciousness, thus benefiting the Harlem Renaissance movement. Its Western-European aesthetic, and its "rational, middle class orientation"<sup>179</sup> proved that the distinction between black and white was artificial, as black people could master 'white' forms of culture. Adams' agency in organizing the tour brought those different purposes together, as well as serving his personal goals: reaching large audiences with his music, displaying the sophistication of his homeland: The Virgin Islands.

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<sup>179</sup> Philipson. "The Harlem Renaissance". 156.

## Chapter 4 – Adams’ racial identity after the tour

This short concluding chapter aims to investigate Adams’ attitudes towards race and identity after the 1924 goodwill tour: can a difference in attitude be perceived? Had Adams become more aware of his skin color and his position in American society, and how can this be detected?

Throughout his memoirs, and in his other writings, Adams does not often explicitly address racial struggles. Rather, he emphasizes how, through discipline, hard work, and cultivation, anything can be achieved, especially in the Virgin Islands, where a sense of ‘racial harmony’ prevails. This may be caused by the goal of the memoirs, which, as is stated, is to provide the younger generations of the Virgin Islands in the 1970s with a sense of self, in a time when “[those] qualities are in danger of eradication by mindless barbarians whose violent actions and alien beliefs threaten the fabric of our community. Although their rhetoric is one of cultural pride, they are in fact betrayers of our most fundamental values and beliefs”.<sup>180</sup> It is likely that the ‘barbarians’ Adams speaks of, are protesting the lack of power invested in them by the U.S. government and advocating for U.S. Virgin Island self-governance. This does not mean, however, that Adams did not experience any racism, or was unaware of his position in America as a black man. There are several events of racism known to have occurred, but which Adams fails to mention in his memoirs, or quickly brushes over<sup>181</sup>. For example, during the 1924 tour, prior to a concert in Philadelphia, the band was treated disrespectfully by the man in charge of the park where they would perform. Although the incident must have been humiliating for Adams and his band, Adams remains factual and free of anger.<sup>182</sup> In the foreword, Clague argues that this might have been a conscious decision, because racism would counter Adams’ argument for obtaining social mobility through hard work. Furthermore, such anecdotes would damage further the reputation of the U.S. Naval administration, which Adams defended throughout his life, forever grateful for the chances he had been given as a musician. One event that stands out as a display of American racism and its effects on Adams, is the rejection of Adams as a member of the American Bandmasters Organization in 1928. Unbeknownst to him, Adams was proposed for membership by two of his colleagues, and he was urged to write an application. However, he

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<sup>180</sup> Adams, *The Memoirs*, 29.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. 131-2.

was denied admission, after being blackballed by “a few southern members”. Several years later, one of the board members sent him a letter, asking him to reapply, as he felt positive Adams would be granted admission this time. Adams thus commented on the subject, on a 1956 radio show: “More to please him than for any other reason, I again applied for membership and was immediately accepted. But I did not follow up on the acceptance, because the matter had become somewhat nauseating to me”.<sup>183</sup>

Rather than affirming the existence of racist sentiments on the U.S. mainland, Adams elaborates on positive interactions between himself and white Americans. For example, Adams recalls the how, on his first trip to the U.S. mainland, he meets one of his musical mentors in person for the first time:

I went to see him with my friend Harry Watt, who commented on my mental abstraction during our ride. I felt ashamed to tell him the reason. Being fully aware of the fact that the color question exists, and being also sensitive, a little too much so, I had certain fears, for up to that time Dr. tapper did not know I was a man of color. On the other hand, I felt in a great measure assured from his writings, for they possessed such a true ring of optimism, high thinking, and broad humanity that it was impossible, I argued within myself, for their author to be possessed with such a vile, silly, and cowardly thing as race hatred.

[...]

By my uniform, he sized me up as the one. I looked for that surprise, which, to be frank, I expected. But I was agreeably disappointed.<sup>184</sup>

Adams constructs his identity not as a member of a race, but as a Virgin Islander. The 1924 tour did not alter his position on the matter. His account of conversations with W.E.B. DuBois, who visited him in his house on the Virgin Islands, is most telling of his attitudes towards race:

I spoke about my native islands and why I thought that because of our unique background and environment we held a different racial attitude than American Negroes. Indeed, as I explained, race had little meaning for most Virgin Islanders because we judged a person by his deeds and not his color and we expected the same in return. DuBois tended to see everything and everyone in purely racial terms but he admitted that he envied me for my indifference to racial considerations. He had a dry sense of humor and his conversation revealed the deep love he had for his race. However, I found his broad genius and great intelligence somewhat disturbing and self-damaging because of his overriding preoccupation with race. And I often pondered, and still ponder, whether this great man was mentally still a slave – a slave to embittered passion and hatred for the white man. [...] And I felt sorry for mankind because his great mind which could be so useful for the world at large had to be dedicated solely to the Negro problem.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Floyd, “Alton Augustus Adams” 178-9.

<sup>184</sup> Adams. *The Memoirs*. 116.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.* 268-9.

First and foremost, Adams was a proud Virgin Islander. This is illustrated by the eleven offers to become the leader of a band program in Philadelphia, and several other offers from American bands, Adams turned down between 1927 and 1931. As Adams states: “I figured the islands needed me more here”.<sup>186</sup>

Adams’ universal outlook on life also resonates in his argument about musical heritage:

I also feel no little amount of pride in being a member of a race which possesses the emotional and intellectual capacity to formulate into art its joys and crows, labor and pain; its struggles, its strifes and its travails. But to contend that the musical appreciation of the race has not developed beyond that epoch which gave birth to these spirituals would be a travesty of truth. [...] Music and, for that matter, art in general should not be viewed as local creations and possessions, but should rather be considered on universal principles. [...] In school life we were brought under the civilizing influences of Shakespeare, Dante and Milton. We do not refuse them because they deal with conditions other than ours, or represent an ‘alien race’. Why, then, refuse the tonal message of the great musicians, those master minds that belong to no time and no nation, but whose works live as vital forces of civilization?

Thus, although Adams was aware of his race and the meaning of his skin color in the United States, he refused to acknowledge that on the Virgin Islands he was treated differently because of it. This may, however, be a conscious decision in order to convince his readership of the necessity of self-cultivation and hard work. His contact with black communities on the U.S. mainland did not bring forth a noticeable change in his position. If anything, it strengthened his position that the U.S. structures of racial hierarchy were not present on the Virgin Islands.

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<sup>186</sup> Floyd. “Alton Augustus Adams”. 178.

## Conclusion

Alton Augustus Adams was an exceptional man: a self-taught musician, composer, and arranger, who acquired international acclaim from a small, isolated island in between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. He also was a social leader who untiringly strived for advancement of the Virgin Islands, his home, in which he took great pride and for which he felt a strong responsibility. Rather than seeking independence, protesting colonizing forces, realizing change centripetally, he chose to work within, or along with, new structures that were imposed on the Virgin Islands, working towards a position near the center, to exert influence from ‘inwards’ out.

As chapters one and two show, Adams cannot be considered a ‘typical’ Virgin Islander. Indeed, because of its cosmopolitan history, and the large variety of cultural influences and social strata, however, a Virgin Island identity has been hard to define. Adams found his answer to this question of identity in the Danish colonial past. By adopting those traits he considered to be beneficial to Virgin Islanders, he constructed an identity that was at once typical to the Virgin Islands and universal. Before the Virgin Islands were transferred from Danish to American rule, Adams already had a strong Westernized aesthetic. Furthermore, he had had extensive contact with American culture through his education. He modelled his musicianship after his great example John Philip Sousa. Yet, he chose which elements of American culture he found useful, both as a musician, and later on as a representative of the black community.

By investigating this case study, the processes of American Empire, of with race relations are an important element, were aimed to be exposed. The argument of both Amy Kaplan and Penny von Eschen, namely that U.S. actions abroad affected domestic race relations, holds, on the very small scale of this study, true. Indeed, Adams was affected by U.S. Empire, both culturally, and, after the arrival of the Naval administration, also in the actual meaning of the term ‘Empire’, according to Maier’s definition. Adams was employed by the U.S. Navy to function as a bridge between them and the Virgin Islanders at home, and as a representative of the successful governance of, and the positive relationship with the new subjects of the U.S. The 1924 goodwill also tour shows, however, that Adams’ agency seamlessly tied his own motives, in addition to those of black American leaders, in with the tour, thus affecting the domestic race relations amongst black Americans of different

ethnicity, those between black Virgin Islanders and black Americans, and between black and white communities.

Due to its relative size, and position in the periphery – both territorial and culturally, little research has been done towards the relation between the U.S. and the Caribbean. Further research in this field should be conducted to reach a deeper understanding of how race relations between the U.S. and their imperial subjects were formed. Especially the influence Caribbean culture has had, and continues to have on American culture, specifically Black American culture, is an interesting field. The relative size, and their isolation, make the Caribbean a useful source for case studies in this field.

Alton Augustus Adams was both lauded and criticized for his methods of betterment of the Virgin Islands. His legacy, however, should not be underestimated, and is as deserving of an audience today as a century ago.

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