

# The Tarnished Arches of the Hamburger King

by Edward S. Shapiro

**Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America**, Marcia Chatelain, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020, pp. 324, \$18.95 paperback.

Ulysses Lee “Junior” Bridgeman died on March 11, 2025. Born in East Chicago, Indiana in 1953, he was a basketball star in high school and then at the University of Louisville where he was a two-time Missouri Valley Conference Player of the Year. He was drafted in the first round of the 1975 National Basketball Association draft and played twelve seasons for the Milwaukee Bucks and the Los Angeles Clippers. He averaged double figures in scoring for nine consecutive seasons and was widely considered to be the best sixth man in the league. Bridgeman also served as president of the National Basketball Players Association from 1985 to 1988. He is best remembered for his athletic career, but there was another and far more significant side to Bridgeman’s life.

Born into a family of modest means, Bridgeman became an enormously successful businessman and one of Louis-

ville’s most important philanthropists. At the time of death he was worth \$1.4 billion, and was one of the richest of retired black NBA players, ranking alongside Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Shaquille O’Neal. The launching pad for his business career was the fast food industry, and at one time he owned over 450 fast food restaurants. Johnson and O’Neal followed in Bridgeman’s path. Johnson at one time owned 125 Starbucks outlets and O’Neal owned over 150 Five Guys hamburger stores. O’Neal also was a spokesman for Papa John’s, the pizza chain, and served on its board of directors.

Bridgeman’s death leads one to think about the role that fast food has played in the history of America’s blacks, and the logical place to start with is *Franchise*, which in 2020 won a Pulitzer Prize in History for Marcia Chatelain, a professor of history at Georgetown University. Unfortunately the book ig-

nores the crucial role the fast food industry has had in accelerating the upward economic and social mobility of ambitious blacks such as Bridgeman; the employment opportunities it has provided for hundreds of thousands of young blacks eager to enter the work force and become economically independent; and that fast food restaurants have been one of the few places in the inner city where blacks could afford and enjoy a family meal.

With McDonald's in the lead, the fast food industry was among the first businesses to integrate its work force and end the racial segregation of its customers in the South during the 1960s, to promote blacks to managerial positions, to award franchises to blacks beginning in December, 1968 when Herman Perry opened his McDonald's outlet in Chicago, to use black-owned advertising and insurance companies, to offer food items that catered to black palates, to fund black cultural activities, and to consult with black community leaders regarding store locations and other matters. Ron Brown, a future Secretary of Commerce during the first term of Bill Clinton, was one of these consultants. By 1982 there were nearly 150 black franchisees, and their stores were among the company's most profitable. By then McDonald's was closely entwined with the black population, and Chatelain reports that during the 1970s "market research reports found that black men displayed a 'tendency' to eat at McDonald's more than any other demographic." (67) Reginald Webb, a black

McDonald's executive, claimed at this time that there was not "a more successful group of black entrepreneurs in America" than black franchisees. (212)

McDonald's is also proud that among its many charitable contributions, the company provides numerous college scholarships to black students. It recently reported awarding over \$38 million to help more than seventeen thousand black and other nonwhite students and employees attend college, especially those enrolled at Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs).<sup>1</sup>

For Chatelain this is all window-dressing and does not absolve fast food from the harm it has inflicted on blacks. She prefers instead to emphasize the negative aspects of the story, and this perhaps accounts for the acclaim her book received upon publication. Adam Lukach's review in the *Chicago Tribune* said the book "consistently underlines the shortcomings of capitalism to solve social problems and economic imbalance." Jennifer Szalai's review in the *New York Times* claimed it was "a cautionary tale about relying on the private sector to provide what the public needs, and how promises of real economic development invariably come up short." Michael Fletcher's review in the *Washington Post* said it "goes far in portraying fast-food restaurants as yet another burden on black America." McDonald's black customers seemed to disagree. They consistently frequented McDonald's while not showing any obvious concern for the shortcomings of capitalism, the public's needs, the

burdens on the black community, and the cosmic complaints of the intelligentsia. They simply wanted to spend their money as they pleased, and McDonald's offered an inexpensive and tasty meal at a convenient location.

Chatelain's distain for the fast-food industry stems from her loathing of capitalism and the limited role that government has played in America when compared to Europe. Her political orientation is revealed by her praise of the Black Panthers and her use of the word "uprisings" to describe the urban riots of the 1960s and 1990s. They were not riots, she believes, but legitimate rebellions against capitalism and racism. Her story in *Franchise*, she says, "is about how capitalism can unify cohorts to serve its interests, even as it disassembles communities." Capitalism is "predicated on harsh inequalities," is "morally bankrupt," and there are "deep connections between the development of modern capitalism and racist subjugation and oppression." This has resulted in a "calamitous" relationship between McDonald's and black America.

Chatelain blames fast food in general and McDonald's in particular for the high rates of obesity, diabetes, elevated blood pressure, and hypertension among blacks; alleges that the relationship between fast food companies and their black franchisees borders on serfdom; believes that fast food outlets encourage gang behavior; accuses the industry of exploiting its workers; and echoes the complaints of some black leaders that fast food restaurants have

encroached on black neighborhoods and then proceeded to drain money out of them. The fast food resistance movement, Chatelain concludes, "took many forms, and taken together, it is clear that fast food's attempt to colonize black America was not unchallenged." (155) And yet despite its numerous evils, blacks have not repulsed the onslaught of fast food because they appreciate what it offers.

Chatelain's most serious charge is directed at exponents of black capitalism who believe that the surest and quickest avenue for blacks to rise out of poverty was through business and by adopting the bourgeois virtues. She asserts the opposite. "Whether it's called black capitalism or empowerment," she writes, "the politics of black business can serve many interests, except for those of blacks most susceptible to the extremes of capitalism and racism." (257) Chatelain asserts that a fundamental conflict has existed between black capitalism and black freedom and self-determination, and that advocates of black capitalism have been delusional. "The varied response to fast food encroachment into the inner city," she notes, "revealed that organized efforts to influence or altogether stop fast food in black neighborhoods became a proxy for talking about racial and economic inequality." (122)

Chatelain is aghast that fast food restaurants pay market wages to its employees and no health insurance, despite many employees being young, healthy, and part-time. The failure to

do so, she argues, results from what she calls “racial capitalism.” *Franchise* is silent regarding the possibility that doing so would undermine the outlets’ financial viability. It is strange that a book on economic history would be so reluctant to address economic considerations.

Chatelain simultaneously berates the industry for its reluctance to locate outlets in black neighborhoods and to grant franchises to blacks and bemoans the deleterious effects their restaurants have placed in the ghetto. Chatelain is particularly angry that the capitalist system has been “starving our collective present and future,” and she warns her readers that when a corporation such as McDonald’s “supplants the state in neighborhoods forced to scramble to acquire necessities for life, then we must adjust our focus to understand how that happened and continue to happen.” (260, 264)

Since the fast food industry has been so entwined with capitalism, it must share the blame for whatever ails America. *Franchise* ends with a lamentation on the influence of capitalism and the fast food industry. Nevertheless, she predicts, a movement is gathering steam so that “public funds, community investment dollars, and collective energies” will support the efforts of food justice activists and destroy the racist capitalist system that undergirds the fast food industry. (264) McDonald’s popularity would seem to suggest that the triumph of this movement is not imminent.

The widespread acclaim accorded to *Franchise* is puzzling until one realizes that it conforms to what is currently esteemed by the historical profession. Of the winners of the Pulitzer Prize in History during the past two decades, not one is on the American Revolution, industrialization, and immigration, the Progressive era, the Great Depression and the New Deal, the Cold War, intellectual history, and the history of religion, art, music, and education. Only one, Eric Foner’s *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (2011), is on the Civil War, and only one, Fredrik Logevall’s *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (2013), is on diplomacy and war.

Instead, what can be called grievance history dominated the awards from 2006 to 2025. Of the twenty-two winners (two prizes were awarded in 2022 and 2025), eleven are on slavery and black history and four on the history of American Indians. These include worthy books written by distinguished historians, but one wonders as to the imbalance. By contrast, of the twenty winners from 1986 to 2005, seven are on colonial history, the American Revolution, and the writing of the constitution, three are on the history of American science, two are on the Civil War, three are on the Great Depression and World War II, and two are on black history. There were no winners on the history of American Indians.

*Franchise*, published in the same year that George Floyd was killed by Minne-

apolis police, was the latest in a lengthy list of muckraking attacks on the American food industry stretching all the way back to Upton Sinclair's classic expose *The Jungle* (1906). They include Jim Hightower, *Eat Your Heart Out: Food Profiteering in America* (1975), John Robbins, *Diet for a New America: How Your Food Choices Affect Your Health, Happiness, and the Future of Life on Earth* (1987), Jeremy Rifkin, *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture* (1993), Gail A. Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S. Meat Industry* (1997), Nichols Fox, *Spoiled: The Dangerous Truth about a Food Chain Gone Haywire* (1997), and Marion Nestle, *Unsavory Truth: How Food Companies Skew the Science of What We Eat* (2018).

The most popular of these was Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2001). This volume criticizes America's fast food restaurants from a different vantage point than Chatelain. One criticism is that fast food restaurants came to be viewed by nationalists in Europe, Latin America, and Asia as the advance guard of an aggressive American cultural imperialism bent on obliterating local cuisines and local food purveyors. Fifty years ago these nationalists would have been in the streets protesting the presence of American oil companies, United Fruit, and the CIA. Today their target is more likely to be the neighborhood McDonald's.

The cultural nationalists lost the battle. By the time Schlosser's book ap-

peared in 2001 there were tens of thousands of fast food restaurants throughout the globe, and their numbers have increased exponentially since then. The global influence of McDonald's was particularly noteworthy. Mikhail Gorbachev wrote the forward of *To Russia with Love*, a memoir by a McDonald's executive. Schlosser reported that McDonald's was spending more for advertising than any other company, that it had surpassed Coca Cola as the world's most widely recognized brand, and that it was one of the world's largest purveyor of toys to children. Ronald McDonald is now the world's second most identifiable fictional character, surpassed only by Santa Claus. Schlosser quoted the Chinese anthropologist Yunxiang Yan that for the residents of Beijing, McDonald's represented "America and the promise of modernization." Den Fujita, a Japanese McDonald's franchisee, even promised his customers that eating McDonald's hamburgers and French fries would make them "taller, our skin will become white, and our hair will be blonde."

The criticisms of Chatelain, *et. al.* of the fast food industry in general and McDonald's in particular reflect the contemporary impulse among the *bien pensant* to force ordinary Americans to adopt enlightened and elite modes of behavior irrespective of what its supposed beneficiaries desire. For them it is shameful that blacks might prefer Big Macs to garden salads, and that the government cannot do anything about it. It is also shameful that the govern-

ment has such limited control over how the industry attracts its patrons, what it offers its customers, and how it compensates its work force. The world-wide popularity of fast food would seem to indicate that the Chatelains of the world have lost this battle, but it is not clear whether they have lost the war. They still control who wins Pulitzer prizes.

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1. “McDonald’s Scholarships,” McDonalds.com, accessed July 2, 2025, <https://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en-us/mcdonalds-scholarships.html>.