

Going South: Tracing Race and Region in the Post-Emancipation Black Atlantic

Elisabeth Engel and Nicholas Grant

The demise of American slavery in 1865 put black Americans in motion to an unprecedented degree. Freed slaves and their descendants migrated from the plantations in the rural South to destinations around the globe. Traveling in a variety of new roles –as missionaries, journalists, agronomists, scientists, athletes, performers, entrepreneurs and political activists – African Americans gained international visibility, inspiring other oppressed populations in the colonial world to struggle for their liberation.

The contributions in this forum examine the cultural spaces and interactions that shaped the worldview of African Americans in the aftermath of the Civil War. Each of the articles reconsider the relationship between African Americans and the African continent. Adding to scholarly work that has sought to complicate Paul Gilroy’s framework of the black Atlantic, contributors examine the creative work that shaped the African diaspora while also documenting how black diasporic identities have developed over time.¹ Building on research that has traced the global contours of the U.S. South, these articles all document how Jim Crow had a profound influence on the ways in which race was discussed around the world.² Bringing black responses to American segregation into conversation with the field of colonial history,

¹ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, In *Identity: Community, Culture and Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2003), 225. As the historian Kristen Mann has commented, black diasporic consciousness has not been static but has instead “been forged and reforged...as successive generations of Africans and persons of African descent all around the Atlantic basin have reconstituted their sense of themselves and their relationship with one another.” Kristin Mann, ‘Shifting Paradigms in the Study of the African Diaspora and of Atlantic History and Culture’, *Slavery & Abolition* 22, no. 1 (1 April 2001): 1–2.

² Cornelis A. van Minnen and Manfred Berg, eds., *The U.S. South and Europe: Transatlantic Relations in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2013); Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Carrie R. Mathews, James L. Peacock and Harry L. Watson, eds., *The U.S. South in a Global World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

contributions also trace how the transnational politics of Jim Crow informed the operation of imperial power as well as the politics of anticolonialism.³

The process of “Going South” that connects the articles in this collection sheds light on how specific regional histories shaped the development of transnational networks throughout the black Atlantic. Specifically, as the authors here document, constructions of race and region in the post-emancipation U.S. South both enabled and constrained the global outlook of African Americans. The racial dynamics of the American South often influenced the operation of colonial power in the global South in the aftermath of slavery. However, even as the racist practices of Jim Crow transcended national borders, conceptions of the South as a marker of racial oppression also played an important role in shaping criticism of white supremacy both within and beyond the borders of the United States. Blackness and ‘Southern-ness’ have regularly been conflated in transnational conversations between African Americans and people of color around the world. Indeed, as Jeanette Jones and Elisabeth Engel demonstrate in this forum, the history, culture and violence of the American South was deployed as a key reference point for black activists and cultural producers as they engaged with one another across national borders.

The other major critical intervention made here relates to the role of Africa in the black Atlantic. Africa has often been cast as static and passive in narratives that examine the transnational engagements of black Americans. As a result, African responses to the circulation of black political and cultural forces originating in the United States have often been neglected. While a number of studies have emphasized the agency of African Americans in the black

³ Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” *The Journal of American History*, 88 (2001); Frederick Cooper, Thomas Holt and Rebecca Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Atlantic world, there has sometimes been a reluctance to acknowledge how black identities were constructed in dialogue with people of African descent beyond the borders of the United States. Africans have always critically engaged with black America. These interactions were never uniform and did not always result in the unification of identities. Rather they involved active negotiation and selective appropriation as Africans grappled with their regional circumstances and articulated their own visions of the world.⁴ Again, this often had a distinctly Southern focus. Africans actively engaged with the racial politics of the American South, debating the meaning of Jim Crow within colonial contexts, while pointing to both the similarities and differences between their own experiences and the lives of the black Americans they encountered. As Laura Chrisman states in her article, it is vital that we recognize how, “Africans selectively engaged with and adapted the materials of the U.S. South, to suit their local, regional needs and desires.”⁵

The ways in which the American South traveled and was utilized in black international conversations connects the six articles that are published here. Spanning more than a century, from 1877 to 2013, authors trace how public discourses, the international press, film, photography, choral music, and political movements debated the global meaning of the Jim Crow South.

Jeannette Eileen Jones opens this forum by examining the relationship between African Americans and African colonialism in the post-reconstruction period. Focusing in on Liberia, she shows how African Americans acted as informal cultural diplomats in Africa. In this era, black American leaders argued that their exposure to Christianity, capitalism, and Western

⁴ Laura Chrisman, “Rethinking Black Atlanticism,” *The Black Scholar*, 30 (2000).

⁵ Laura Chrisman, “American Jubilee Choirs, Industrial Capitalism and Black South Africa” CITATION WITHIN THIS ISSUE

democracy could be used to ‘uplift’ their African brothers, actively engaging in ‘civilizing’ discourses that informed American imperial interventions in West Africa. Motivated by their desire to escape Jim Crow as well as the promise of new political and economic freedoms in Africa, black Americans persistently connected the American ‘Negro Problem’ to the development of colonial rule in Africa. As Jones’ article ultimately makes clear, it is hard to separate Jim Crow from the racial dynamics that underpinned American empire-building projects in Africa.

Focusing on the U.S. and South Africa, Laura Chrisman emphasizes how cultural producers shaped how black Southern identity circulated transitionally. Through her exploration of the touring experiences of American Jubilee Choirs in South Africa, Chrisman reveals the transnational reach of commercialized black music in the late nineteenth century, documenting how these performances could inspire and connect visions of black liberation on both sides of the Atlantic. Although black South Africans welcomed the Jubilee Singers enthusiastically, Chrisman cautions against reading this reaction as evidence that black South Africans looked to African Americans as leaders in their joint struggle against white supremacy. The sonic actions of the Jubilee Singers were also a springboard for black South African claims for recognition as modern, educated subjects - capable of, and entitled to, liberal self-determination.

Entering the realm of transatlantic visual culture, Elisabeth Engel traces the emergence of African American missionary photography in Africa in the early twentieth century. Configuring photographs as material objects and semiotic representations “in motion”, she shows how technology enabled African missionaries to reflect on their relationship with Africa. This black regime of gazing often constructed visible differences between the black populations of both countries. Missionary photographers deployed colonial conventions that

reinforced binaries of ‘Western civilization’ and ‘African primitivism’. At other times, images employed the visual codes of the U.S. South to emphasize the role that missionaries could potentially play in uplifting black Africans. The visual archive produced by African American missionaries therefore reveals transatlantic black hierarchies and regional specificities that have often been overlooked in historical work that emphasizes the development of pan-African unity between the U.S. and Africa.

Next up is Robert Trent Vinson, who draws attention to the role played by religion, entertainment and sport in connecting the struggles of African Americans and black South Africans. Vinson charts how an “Up From Slavery” narrative of African American progress often inspired black South Africans in their own struggles against segregation and apartheid. Focusing in on individuals who traveled between both countries, he shows how these sojourns deepened transnational bonds across the Atlantic. Focusing specifically on the travels of Chief Albert J. Luthuli in the U.S., this article illuminates how Africans entered the global human rights struggle against white supremacy. Finally, the article also considers the anti-apartheid activism of the tennis player Arthur Ashe, including his controversial visits to South Africa in the 1970s. By addressing this underexplored episode in the history of the global antiapartheid movement, Vinson shows how Ashe harnessed his sporting prowess and international celebrity to challenge the organizing ‘logic’ of white supremacy in South Africa.

Nicholas Grant’s contribution addresses the border-crossing journalism of the *Negro Digest* in the 1940s. The inaugural title of the Johnson Publishing Company, the *Digest* brought articles that challenged Jim Crow into conversation with pieces that explored race relations in the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa and the Pacific. As such, the magazine reflected elements of the African American call for a “Double Victory” – against both fascism and Jim Crow – during

the Second World War. However, while the clear majority of articles in the *Digest* challenged racial oppression at both a local and global level, the publication's patriotic tone and embrace of American values occasionally worked to limit its global analysis of racism. Focusing in on *Digest* features that exoticized Africa, Grant shows how the promise of American nationality placed barriers between African Americans and oppressed people of color overseas.

Finally, Leigh Anne Duck's article addresses how Hollywood has represented the regional politics of race. Through her close reading of Lee Daniels' *The Butler* (2013), Duck uncovers a series of transnational references that question standard cinematic narratives that have often cast American racism as constituting a fundamentally 'Southern problem.' Recognizing *The Butler*'s "innovative approach to space", the article insists that it is possible for mainstream films to acknowledge the cosmopolitan nature and transnational character of African American protest. This tension between Hollywood's historical tendency to produce narrow, nationally-focused depictions of the civil rights movement and the impulse to provide more radical and geographically expansive representations of black protest can be seen in the relationship between Cecil Gains, the film's moderate protagonist, and his politically outspoken son Louis. Despite its conciliatory tone, the film provides some leeway for a radical, transnational re-reading of the civil rights movement, as Cecil ultimately joins Louis in protesting South African apartheid.

Taken together, these contributions ask whether it is possible to write a history of the black Atlantic and the U.S. South without reproducing the political and cultural hegemony of African Americans. By tracing the transnational politics of the American South, they show how Jim Crow was bound up with histories of colonialism and imperialism. In addition to this, they argue that it is essential we recognize the agency of continental Africans when it came to

engaging with black American culture and politics. The mutually constitutive relationship of race and region that the authors address here ultimately reasserts the need for scholars to uncover new transnational connections, paradigms and spaces that further complicate our understanding of black Atlantic.