

[The U.S. South in the Black Atlantic: Transnational Histories of the Jim Crow South Since 1865](#)

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The U.S. South in the Black Atlantic: Transnational Histories of the Jim Crow South Since 1865

Conference at the GHI Washington, June 4-6, 2015. Conveners: Elisabeth Engel (GHI), Nicholas Grant (University of East Anglia) and Mischa Honeck (GHI). Participants: Andrew Barnes (Arizona State University), Manfred Berg (Heidelberg University), Ciprian Burlacioiu (Ludwig Maximilian University), Laura Chrisman (University of Washington), Leigh Anne Duck (University of Mississippi), Kate Dossett (University of Leeds), Gerald Horne (University of Houston), Jeannette Eileen Jones (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), James Meriwether (California State University Channel Islands), Fredrik Petersson (Åbo Akademi University), Imaobong Umoren (St. Cross College, St Giles), Robert Trent Vinson (College of William and Mary), Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI),

Most scholars of African American history agree that the demise of slavery in the U.S. put black Americans in motion to an unprecedented degree. Following their emancipation in 1865, freed slaves left the plantations of the U.S. South as missionaries, journalists, agronomists, scientists and political activists, traveling not only to the North, but also the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, and Asia. As Paul Gilroy has outlined, these movements stood at the core of the "black Atlantic," the ongoing spatial and cultural formation of Afro-diasporic exchange that transcends both national and ethnic boundaries. This workshop revisited Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic from the perspective of the U.S. South. It explored the influence that the U.S. South has had on shaping how African Americans experienced and interpreted race as a global issue. In particular, the workshop traced the relationship that black Americans developed to the U.S. South as they traveled overseas, using these movements to place the U.S. South into the context of the colonial and racial regimes of the global South.

The workshop began with Brenda Gayle Plummer's keynote address, "Race and Place in the Age of Space." Plummer examined the global significance of race relations in the American South through the development of NASA and the Apollo missions. Noting that the South was "ground zero" for the space program, she explored how narratives of technological advancement were in tension with the racial realities of the South. The paper offered a strong critique of the space program and of the Federal Government's failure to challenge racial hierarchies in the South. Pointing out how space travel became associated with whiteness in the national cultural imagination, Plummer documented the extent to which African Americans were often left unmoved by the space race. Indeed, many African American activists used the specter of the space program to critique race and class inequalities in the U.S. As one black protestor commented with reference to federal spending on the space program, what does America want - "Rockets or Ricketts?" Space travel was often viewed critically by African Americans, as a way of highlighting inequality and contrasting the difference between white and black America. The Black Panther Party pushed this argument further, with Connie Matthews noting that the space

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program represented further proof of America's expansionist character and "imperialist plans." In the view of the Panthers, the U.S. was not content with colonizing the world, but outer space too. The keynote also documented how African American artists critiqued the whiteness of the space program through popular culture, noting in particular the Afro-Futurism of Parliament Funkadelic and Gil Scott Heron's (1970) "Whitey on the Moon." Ultimately Plummer demonstrated how the space race helped further transform the local politics of the South into a geopolitical issue during the cold war. In addition, she provided a pointed critique of the extent to which space was formulated as a white space, which, for many African Americans, further underlined the racial inequalities that existed in the United States.

The first panel, on the U.S. South in print culture, featured three papers that employed textual and visual sources to highlight the place and prominence of the U.S. South in creating a black transatlantic public sphere. In his talk "*Negro Digest*: Interpreting the Global South in the 1940s," Nicholas Grant discussed the border-crossing journalism of the *Negro Digest*, a leading African American periodical, during the 1940s. Grant demonstrated that the *Digest* had an international focus and constantly connected Jim Crow racism to black oppression in Latin America and Africa. This emphasis on black solidarity, however, stood in an uneasy relationship with a discourse of African American hegemony in the global anticolonial struggle. The extent to which African Americans served as models of black progress was also the topic of Andrew Barnes's paper "Jim Crow America Observed: African American Life as Depicted in African Newspapers 1880-1920." Barnes analyzed perceptions of black American life in the African press around the turn of the century, arguing that most papers used examples of African American self-improvement in the post-slavery South to counter European ideas about African inferiority. Entering the realm of visual culture, Elisabeth Engel investigated the role of photography as a form of auto-ethnography and self-fashioning prevalent in African American missionary work in Africa. In her paper "Southern Looks: The Image of Africa in African American Missionary Photography since 1900" she showed that labor, agriculture, and dress functioned as productive visual tropes that interlinked the U.S. and Global South. This kind of missionary photographic self-fashioning, Engel argued, substantiated ideas of Southernness by reinforcing civilization-primitivism binaries rather than promoting the dominant notion of the pan-African unity of black people.

Providing further evidence for the entangled histories of the U.S. and the Global South, the second panel looked at how the South was performed in cultural productions based on examples from popular music and film studies. In her talk "Sounding Blackness in the 1890s: Choral Music and the American Global South in Black South African Nationalism," Laura Chrisman analyzed the Virginia Jubilee Singers, an African American singing ensemble that performed in England and South Africa. She revealed how the transnational reach of commercialized black music around 1890 could inspire and merge visions of African American and black African liberation. Although black South Africans welcomed the Jubilee Singers enthusiastically, Chrisman cautioned against reading their positive reception as evidence that black Africans had no agenda of their own and looked to African Americans as their leaders in a joint struggle. Leigh Anne Duck's analysis "Local and Global Souths: Framing Civil Rights in Lee Daniels' *The Butler*" focused on a Hollywood-produced historical drama released in 2013. Duck recovered a series of explicit and implicit transnational references while exposing a long tradition in mainstream U.S. movies of whitewashing and falsely nationalizing the civil rights struggle. According to Duck, the clash between the regional-moderate and the global-radical version of the black freedom struggle is condensed in the relationship of Cecil Gains, the film's protagonist, with his son Louis. Despite its conciliatory tone, the film provides some leeway for a radical and transnational re-reading of the Civil Rights Movement in showing how Cecil ultimately joins Louis in protesting against South African apartheid.

The third panel, on the South in motion, provided a close examination of travels that linked the American South and Africa. Robert Trent Vinson opened the session with his paper "Crossing the Water: Chief Albert Luthuli, African Americans and the Global Anti-apartheid Movement." Focusing on Luthuli and Arthur Ashe, a black athlete, Vinson traced how their travels between the United States and South Africa connected the anti-apartheid movement to the civil rights struggle. Vinson illustrated that Luthuli's understanding of the global

nature of racism and his critiques of apartheid were shaped by his extensive visit to the American South in 1948. He made a compelling case for the important role that black South Africans played in the black freedom struggle in the U.S. Imaobong Umoren's paper "Eslanda Robeson's Travels and Activism: Tracing the Intersections between the U.S. South and the Global South" also explored the importance of travel in connecting the U.S. and Global South. Focusing on the journalist and activist Eslanda Goode Robeson, she showed that Robeson's intimate knowledge of the racial practices of the U.S. South informed her perspective on colonialism and white supremacy. As Umoren argued, Robeson's travels throughout Africa in 1936-1937, prompted her early support for the International Council on African Affairs (ICAA), an important anticolonial lobbying organization. The panel's final paper, "A Transatlantic Religious Emancipating Network (1921: U.S. - South Africa - East Africa)," by Ciprian Burlacoiu explored the merging of organized religion with the Pan-Africanism of Marcus Garvey (UNIA) based on the example of the African Orthodox Church founded by George Alexander McGuire. Burlacoiu showed that the arrival of Garvey's church in Africa was not due to the circulation of people, but the UNIA newspaper the *Negro World*. The paper spread Garvey's message of spiritual freedom and racial nationalism to Africa and thus inspired the formation of numerous African Orthodox congregations in Uganda, Kenya, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa, even after the African Orthodox Church broke away from Garvey's UNIA in September 1923.

The final panel examined how political activists and organizations connected the U.S. South to other areas around the globe. James Meriwether's talk "The Relationship between Our Problems and the Problems of Africans: African-Americans Engage the Black Atlantic Freedom Struggle" introduced the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa (ANLCA) and its conference in the Shoreham Hotel in Washington DC in 1964 as a key moment of inter-Southern anticolonial organizing. According to Meriwether, the ANLCA brought together labor organizers such as A. Philip Randolph, Maida Springer, and George McCray with individuals and organizations from across the African continent, thereby putting decolonization politics on the agenda of both U.S. foreign policy and the black American labor movement. While the ANLCA failed to alter international politics, its efforts gave strength and visibility to African American ties to Africa. Jeannette Eileen Jones's talk "The Negro's Peculiar Work': African American Discourses on U.S. Empire, Race, and the African Question, 1877-1919" went back to the turn of the century, when the colonization of Africa became discursively linked to the "Negro question," the term used to refer to American race relations after emancipation. Jones showed that African Americans presented themselves as informal cultural diplomats, who encouraged the U.S. to intervene in European colonization, thus supporting American expansion and empire-building. The panel closed with Fredrik Petersson's talk on "Pan-Africanism and International Communism between the Wars (1919-39): Agents of Change and Contradictions." Drawing primarily on the example of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCMW), Petersson demonstrated that Pan-Africanism and international Communism diverged when it came to issues of racism, capitalism, and imperialism. Based on this conflict, Petersson asked us to consider conflicts and tensions that existed in organizations and movements associated with the international left.

The roundtable discussion that closed the workshop centered on 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. Participants agreed that the currently predominant frameworks of Gilroy's black Atlantic and of the black or African diaspora, with its implicit focus on displaced populations, have contributed to the privileging of African American experiences. They centralize slavery as the "American exception," and marginalize the history of colonialism and imperialism, most notably by marginalizing the African experience, i.e. the archives and agency of continental Africans. Based on this criticism, participants discussed new approaches. Laura Chrisman suggested that concepts of internal colonization (Robert Allen) could help scholars place the African American experience within the context of imperial and colonial history. Manfred Berg reminded us that the acquisition of new research skills, such as languages, are crucial when attempting to demonstrate how African Americans interacted with black individuals and organizations struggling for self-determination around the world. Leigh Anne Duck raised a similar concern, but also emphasized the productivity of ongoing attempts to devise new

transnational paradigms, rubrics, and spaces in Southern Studies. Instead of dismissing “Southern exceptionalism,” Duck stressed the need to re-work our understanding of regional specificity when carrying out research. By using conceptual tools such as “enunciation” and “translation,” she suggested, scholars could trace spatial and temporal specifics that go far beyond the traditional borders of the South, and thus challenge its “exceptional” status. Similarly, Gerald Horne added that scholars would always have to account for the demographic reality that the majority of black Americans have lived and are living in the South. He argued that it is not enough to simply deconstruct the South or to re-think the “black Atlantic” on a conceptual level. There is also a need to alter institutional structures that promote American imperialism and exceptionalist myths when it comes to race in the United States. A practical approach to challenge the political and cultural dominance of African Americans, Horne noted, would be to move these conversations to Namibia, a former German colony, and to include researchers from Brazil and Canada. Another overdue approach would be to understand the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution as documents that safeguard white supremacy to the present day. To this end, Horne outlined how the history of the South relates to the legacies and present realities of U.S. imperialism, and thus becomes a field of research in which historians should aim to revise the master narrative of American “democracy.”

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