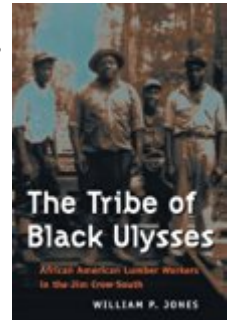


**William P. Jones.** *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005. xv + 235 pp. \$20.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07229-1.



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## Ulysses Unbound

William P. Jones, in his book *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South*, contributes some interesting new perspectives to our understanding of African-American working-class history. Jones tries to introduce new ideas to debates surrounding questions of labor organizing, industrialization, family, culture and the role that black lumber workers played in shaping and transforming these forces and institutions. As the author points out, many sociologists and historians believed that black workers and their families in the South were devastated and misplaced by twentieth-century industrialization. Entire canons of literature and public policy through the century accepted this notion as a fundamental truth without critical analysis. Jones uses this study to suggest that black lumber workers were not caught up in and displaced by the industrial whirlwind, but were instead central to and negotiated the conditions of the Southern industrial workplace.

The title of the book might be misleading to an uninformed reader. This book is about black lum-

ber workers in three specific places in the South: Bogalusa, Louisiana; Chapman, Alabama; and Elizabethtown, North Carolina. Additionally it is only about those workers after 1919; anyone looking for late-nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century lumber mills will not find much of it in this book. Jones selected those towns because they represent different types of lumber mills, and because the position of black workers in each of those workplaces was much different. Although the primary research comes from just three locations, there is enough difference in each of them to give a reader a sense of the great expanse of the Southern lumber industry. Additionally, Jones does tie what happened in these locations with literature published about other places in the South to suggest broader patterns and demonstrate some continuity throughout the industry. Although there have been many studies of lumber in the South, most of them, such as Douglas Flamming and Jeffrey A. Drobney's works, tend to examine one mill town or a region within one state instead of the entire South.[1] Jones hopes

that this work will shed light on black workers in the lumber industry throughout the South.

Jones's work is also interesting because it intersects a variety of interpretive and historiographic debates. Ten years ago, the *Journal of Urban History* featured a special issue concerning the state of "African American Urban History." The editors, Raymond A. Mohl and Kenneth W. Goings, both addressed the state and direction of the black working class within the context of the city.[2] From that special issue it seemed as if much of the research and continuing debate surrounding the black working-class experience would come from American cities; however some of the most dynamic work on the black working class has come not from the cities, but from rural South. With the publication of Steven Hahn's *A Nation Under Our Feet* it is clear that the Southern rural experience is just as important to understanding the formation of the black working class as the urban experience. [3]

Jones's book demonstrates that even before and throughout the time of the Great Migration, black workers in the lumber industry played an important part in shaping the black labor experience and negotiating gains black workers enjoyed before the 1950s. Interestingly, this book also addresses infrapolitics and the black working class. Jones challenges the work of James C. Scott and his ideas of everyday working-class resistance and hidden transcripts.[4] Jones claims that black workers and their labor leaders were very public about their feelings working in the Jim Crow South, although infrapolitics and hidden transcripts were part of their lived experience, they also very openly helped to shape the course of Southern industrialization to favor their condition through union organizing and more effectively through the federal government via the New Deal. Another strength of the book is that it does not approach the African-American workers' experience through the perspective of white unions and interracial union-

ism movements. Although interracial unionism does appear in the text, it is not one of the central points. This book does not attempt to address Herbert Gutman's age-old question regarding interracial unionism and the black worker in the South, but instead paints a picture of black workers from their own perspective and the world they created. Thus this book is important for overturning old paradigms for new.[5]

There are a few weaknesses with this book. It seemed to be a five-hundred-page work crammed into two hundred pages, which is a compliment to the author and a criticism of the working of modern university presses as they demand less content and exploration from the books they publish. With the demands publishers place on authors, Jones probably could not explore in more detail the pre-1919 lumber mills and the lumber mill culture that captured the nation in the 1920s and 1930s. It seems like entire books could be produced just on those topics themselves and are probably best left out of this work and available for future historians inspired by *The Tribe of Black Ulysses*.

#### Notes

[1]. Douglas Flamming, *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884-1984* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and Jeffery A. Drobnay, *Lumbermen and Log Sawyers: Life, Labor, and Culture in the North Florida Timber Industry, 1830-1930* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997).

[2]. Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, "Toward A New African American History," *Journal of Urban History* 21 (March 1995): pp. 283-295.

[3]. Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggle in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2003).

[4]. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). For the debate surrounding hidden and unhidden transcripts and black work-

ers, consult Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith, "'Unhidden' Transcripts: Memphis and African American Agency, 1862-1920," in *The New African American Urban History*, ed. Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996), pp.142-163; and Robin D.G. Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *ibid*, pp. 187-229.

[5]. See Herbert Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America: The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of Their Meaning: 1890-1900," in *The Negro and the American Labor Movement*, ed. Julius Jacobson (New York: Anchor Books, 1968), pp. 49-127; Herbert Hill, "A Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America," *Politics, Culture and Society* 2 (Winter 1998): pp. 132-200; and Eric A. Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 26 (March 1998): pp. 146-174.

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