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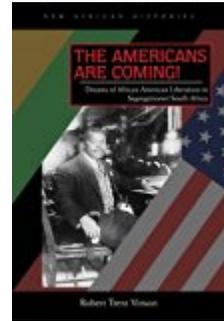
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Trent Vinson. *The Americans Are Coming! Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012. xv + 235 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1986-1.

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The American Presence in South Africa, Real and Imagined

In this elegant, sober, and readable book, Robert Vinson tells the story of America in South Africa: the surprisingly important roles played by Americans, by American ideas, and by ideas about America in prewar popular African politics. Other historians have discussed especially the centrality of religious connections with the United States, via the African Methodist Episcopal, Pentecostal, Anglican, American Congregational, and Baptist churches over and throughout the Atlantic littorals. But no one before Vinson has put together such an accessible, wide-ranging, and meticulously documented history of the South African popular (Black) engagement with ideologies from and about the New World.

Not surprisingly, the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) of Marcus Garvey figures prominently in Vinson's account. The force carrying Garveyism ran up from the past into the twentieth century in South Africa, and it was aimed at men's mobilization. Africans seized on the potentialities of post-Civil War American Blackness for their own reasons. But because America was so far away, the proposition that African Americans in the 1920s were "potential liberators ... in their [Africans'] own battles against South African segregation" may be seen as preeminently a millenarian idea (p. 2). (We will leave aside for a moment whether "segregation" meant similar things South Africa and the United States.) Of course, Garveyism itself was a "kaleidoscopic" (p. 3) movement, difficult to pin down. Black American veterans of World War I came home to face an insurgent

white racism, even as many Black South Africans looked to them as "alternative models of modernity" and vested their future "salvation" with them (p. 6).

Vinson begins unraveling this tangle of practice and ideation by recounting the initial visits of the Virginia Jubilee Singers under Orpheus McAdoo. The Civil War having given definition to an initial, rising, Christian, international Africanness or Blackness, McAdoo and his singers, including ten graduates of the famous Hampton Institute, brought its lessons to Africa. A dozen South Africans more eventually came through the "educational pipeline" thus established, before 1900. By 1924, there were four hundred such visitors (p. 17). How were these Black Americans treated in South Africa? Before 1906, they were classed as honorary whites, but after that, not so (pp. 24; 29). Vinson tells the story of how the silent film of Jack Johnson's 1908 heavyweight-boxing victory circulated in the imperial world, a counter-hegemonic set of images suggesting Black prowess, which frightened white administrators. Meanwhile Black missionaries such as James East of Tuskegee brought the Baptist work-and-pray model to South Africa in the same years. The confluence of these factors produced the situations and emphases that Vinson is attentive to.

The widening reach of the Tuskegee Institute in South Africa might also be examined alongside Andrew Zimmerman's book about Togo (West Africa) and Tukegee and German social science.[1]The creation of the "global

South” was not a simple story, and the “dream of liberation” was simultaneously a political and a religious yearning. Vinson links several figures whom our historiography usually keeps separate, such as William Cullen Wilcox, the American Board mission pastor, and John Dube, who tried to establish “his own mission field” (p. 36) in Qadi (Natal) territory, before (in Brooklyn) he earned his ordination as a Congregational minister. He touted the Tuskegee model for South Africa, even as southern (U.S.) whites embraced it, and radical African Americans dissented from it. American money also went into Ohlange, Dube’s own educational institution.[2] Dube went on to become the first president of the African National Congress. Madie Hall Xuma was an American instrumental in forming the Women’s League. In these and other ways, American ideas entered the core of South African incipient nationalism.

Apart from such influences were the forces associated with ideas *about* Americans, which may have been only haphazardly related to reality. The belief that Americans and especially African Americans were going to arrive *en masse* to rescue the besieged peasants was one such unreal idea. That the paths there involved Christians in Tuskegee and the early ANC is already fascinating, but main avenue in my view lay elsewhere, in the politics of the people of the countryside. The attribution of qualities to an imagined being, the independent Black American, was joined to the the influence of Black Americans as agents themselves.

“The Americans are coming” *idea* was many things to many different groups. But as Vinson argues, it also marked the “failure” of British imperial citizenship, whose terminus Vinson dates to 1910 (the establishment of the Union of South Africa; perhaps a little early in my view). He might have added, too, the failure of the initial “Ethiopian” churches, with their radical stance bringing God’s justice to bear on this world, and which were already giving way to Pentecostal-style worship. Something new and international was needed to take their place: something just as rational, or transrational, as the old fealty to men in alliance, preferably under a powerful “chief” (the original word also connoted “lion”). For a while, Marcus Garvey occupied that position, recognized as a monarch over an emerging transnational Black African identification (p. 65). Garvey was influenced by Gandhi (as were the early ANC founders), and by the Irish struggle against British rule; his UNIA newspaper, *The Negro World*, reached a circulation of almost 200,000 in 1921 (and several persons most likely read every copy). Garvey’s approach to South Africa was both redemption-

ist (in keeping with most African Americans’s views), and technocratic, aiming to “modernize all Africa in five years” (p. 68). Significantly, Garveyism also spread in church services on Sunday. It was also a religious idea.

Vinson is particularly good on Cape Town in the 1900s and 1910s. West Indian UNIA dockworkers in Cape Town introduced their Garveyite, incendiary, and religious ideas to the International Commercial Worker’s Union (and its independent successor), the ICU, and then afresh into the heart of the ANC. By the middle of the 1920s, as Garvey’s personal fortunes declined, Garveyism accelerated in South Africa. Even after consorting with white supremacists, even after being put in jail, “Garvey” was a name uttered with power, connoting esteem, and it carried an Africanist strain into the African National Congress (ANC). Vinson follows James Thaele, ANC leader (and vice president), from South Africa to Lincoln University (near Philadelphia), where Thaele participated in college “bull sessions” lasting deep into the night. Thaele initially embraced the (false) promise of territorial segregation to provide for national African territory, and with Clements Kadalie (the ICU leader), supported Barry Hertzog and the National Party in 1924, only to regret it later. Hertzog, sensing the danger of Garveyism and these transatlantic connections, Hertzog turned away from Thaele and all Black nationalism, and towards chiefs (as a matrix of forms), bringing them into the machinery of colonialism.

Vinson’s chapter on “Dr.” Wellington Buthelezi (or Butelezi) is the best in the book. A Garvey-influenced entrepreneur and con man (pp. 115, 117), Buthelezi spoke the redemptionist language of missionaries and said he was one of them, an American on an official mission to initiate from the inside the independent African American Christian conquest of South Africa. Neither a doctor, nor familiar with Chicago as he claimed, Buthelezi was a Zulu-speaker straddling the divide between religious founder and fraud. Like Joseph Smith (founder of Mormonism), “Dr” Buthelezi at times gazed into a magic bit of glass or another shiny object and “saw” the imminent future. Most of all, in his care the metaphorical understanding that African American self-uplift and devout faith could infuse South Africa with a new destiny, became the *promise* that African Americans *were coming*. That ringing Christian cadence which speaks to the heart and not to the head was the Wellingtonite specialty; the unreality of the imminent rescue did not count against it, because alongside it, one also heard, “the Son of Man [was] com[ing] out on his Chariot of Fire to redeem his people” (p. 105). The expectation of a men’s alliance lay

deep in the popular politics of Africans in the past, even if its referent was ultra-modern—as it in fact always had been.[3] Wellington Buthelezi’s followers called themselves “Americans,” Walter Sisulu recalled from his attendance at one of their schools (he calls it “a Wellingtonite school”), and they prayed not to “the God of Abraham” but to “the God of Mtirara [people of Thembu chief] or Langalibalele,” a distinction also preached by Kadalie’s ICU organizers in the late 1920s. This “God of,” or originally, “ancestor of” in actual speech,—of their own chiefs—was their own prior self. Americanism offered a key to unlocking this most indigenous kind of power.

The last chapter of *The Americans Are Coming!* traces the demise of Americanist millenarian ideas and expectations, and Buthelezi’s and Garvey’s brief return to prominence after 1927. Here Vinson considers also the white progressive, administrative-science streak, tracking C. T. Loram and the YMCA in their uplift movements. Vinson is not, however, as interested in elite or white interactions with America. These involved South Africa’s image in the West, on international tourism, the promulgation of prewar white American culture by way of the cinema, and of course official relations between the countries. Such a chapter might have also reviewed (for instance) international crime as outlined by Charles van Onselen and others.[4] One might have noted administrative connections, such as correspondence between the Native Affairs Department and the Indian Affairs Bureau (U.S.) on the American implementation of a “reservation” land policy. As things are, Vinson notes that not only Blacks projected ideas on imagined Others: the floundering of Alfred Milner’s reconstruction of South Africa allowed South African whites to cite the supposed (in fact, not actual) “failure” of Reconstruction in the U.S. South as support for their racism.

We come full circle in thinking about Joe Louis, another great African American boxer, and in Alfred Xuma’s subsequent restoration of the ANC.[5] Not only Walter Sisulu built on family connections to Americanist African nationalism and pro-labor agitation. Max Yergen, an American Communist and YMCA leader, helped radicalize Govan Mbeki. John Nkadimeng’s father belonged to the expanding ICU.[6] The American story feeds naturally into an account of the 1958-59 Africanist breakaway from the ANC (p. 140). There follows a short essay by Vinson on his sources.

On the recurring overlap between religious and political salvation in this book, in the words and expectations of South Africans, Vinson writes carefully that he shows

“the centrality of religion as one of the earliest, and one of the few,” areas in which Africans kept command over their own lives (p. 7). Yes, but by the same evidence, the only way Africans were (quite grudgingly) permitted to exercise command over themselves and their social structures was “religiously” so. Religious meetings were permitted, political ones could be broken up: thus the religious dimension was shaped and maintained by police methods. And religious gatherings continued to absorb excess force from mobilizations stymied in the world of blood, batons, and bricks.

This is a timely and important book, a great contribution to transnational and Atlantic history, and a genre-buster that dispenses with the border between American studies and African studies.[7] Vinson leaves signposts for major shifts and framings in South African and Atlantic world history in helping to tell his story, and manages not to overwhelm this (motivated) reader with names. There are a few small errors. It was not quite that whites were “allowed” to evict African sharecroppers who did not already work for a wage (p. 44); the 1913 Act said they *had* to do so, accelerating a decades-long process of dispossession. This reviewer has now assigned this book to an ordinary undergraduate class and can report positive results. We grappled with what “America” meant to South Africans in the early twentieth century, to excellent effect. Yet Vinson as author assumes somewhat more knowledge about American history in the period of Segregation than American students possess! One has to remind them that African Americans suffered removal from voting rolls and persecution and even lynchings in the same period of “America’s” influence in South Africa. Nonetheless, students clearly engaged with the book. It worked.

One of the biggest implications to emerge from *The Americans Are Coming!* for this reviewer is that imperialism—Empire—was an ongoing attempt to beat back other kinds of association in the praxis and consciousness of the world. Nationalisms and religious and ethnic associations, including Yoruba, Kikuyu, Tsonga, Shembe-ite, and Prophet Harris followers, “Negritude,” all emerged out of connective processes spanning the Atlantic, as did the Garveyite phenomenon in South Africa illuminated by Vinson, but in competition with “empire.” These movements shared two features: they understood the African or African Atlantic “self” in an alternative cosmopolitan framework, and they were all systematically misrepresented, and combated, piecemeal, by imperial administrations and their scientists, who wanted strictly comparable forms of identity for subjects. What

was cancelled in the scope of Empire and later the globalizing domain of nation-states was the organic growth of transregional mobilizations linked together by the idea of a positive, Africa-based, transatlantic mutual participation.

Notes

[1]. Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[2]. Heather Hughes, *The First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC* (Cape Town: Jacana Press, 2011).

[3]. Paul S. Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400 to 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapters 2, 5.

[4]. One can consult my review of Van Onselen, *The Fox and the Flies: The Secret Life of a Grotesque Master*

Criminal (London: Walker & Company, 2007) in “Jack the Ripper in South Africa?” *South African Historical Journal* 61, no. 1 (2009): 187–201.

[5]. Peter Limb, *The ANC: The Early Years* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2011); and Peter Limb, ed., *A. B. Xuma: Autobiography and Selected Works* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2012).

[6]. According to his own interview (with Wulfie Kodesh), June 23, 1994, MCA 6-340, Mayibuye Centre: Oral history of exiles project - sound and oral history catalogue, UWC Robben Island Mayibuye Archives, Cape Town, South Africa.

[7]. Joining J. Mutero Chirenje, *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in Southern Africa, 1883–1916* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); James Campbell, *Song of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Africa and the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

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