

# H-Net Reviews

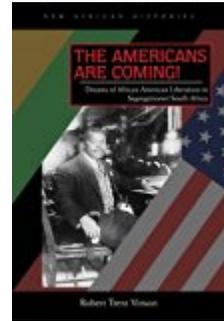
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**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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## Back in Africa

Robert Trent Vinson has written a transnational history that connects the British West Indies, the United States, and South Africa in order to trace the origins of the African National Congress (ANC) and the liberation of black South Africans from apartheid. While mapping the chronology of American influences on South Africans, from Booker T. Washington to the Virginia Jubilee Singers to boxer Jack Johnson, and ultimately to the Jamaican Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Vinson traces the development of African nationalism and racial identity that would eventually unify the majority of black South Africans against the European-descended ruling minority.

*The Americans Are Coming!* is also the first full-length monograph featuring the spread of Garveyism in Africa, and it documents the broad scope of UNIA organization in what are now the Republic of South Africa and Namibia. Vinson provides UNIA division locations, names and numbers of members, and biographical sketches of chapter leaders including their linkages to the United States and the West Indies. Many of these Garveyites had overlapping affiliations with foreign mission stations, U.S. educational institutions, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), and the ANC (and its predecessor, the South African Native National Congress [SANNC]). Vinson argues that identification with successful diasporic black people gave South Africans models for uplift and organization, necessary elements in

forming an indigenous nationalist movement like the ANC. Vinson makes extensive use of South African government documents at archives in Cape Town, Pretoria, and Pietermaritzburg, as well as sixty-five mostly South African newspapers to document the changing South African perceptions of African Americans and West Indians over time. While South Africa's white officials began to view these visitors as subversive and dangerous outside agitators, black South Africans saw them as a potential source of salvation and liberation.

It is widely acknowledged that Garvey's nationalist rhetoric had the civilizationist bent of the nineteenth century, but also it often included radical and militant overtones more akin to modern black nationalism. Vinson exposes the same contradictory tendencies in his biographical information about SANNC/ANC leaders and founders who were influenced by New World Africans, such as Washington and Garvey. Not only does the author reveal "the kaleidoscopic nature" of Garveyism in South Africa, but he also explores the way influences as diverse as Baptist missionaries, West Indian sailors, and boxing heavyweight world champion Jack Johnson formed the foundation for the "indigenization and spread of Garveyism" (pp. 3, 2). Whereas John Dube, an early nationalist leader in South Africa, was "a gradualist on the Booker T. Washington model," Wellington Butelezi, a Zulu and a millenarian who viewed Garvey as an eminent conqueror and savior, led many of his zealous followers to resort to arson, violence, and intimidation in the face of state

repression and local indigenous resistance. Charismatic minister James Thaele, Vinson explains, “was the South African Marcus Garvey and the primary bridge between the ANC and the UNIA” (p. 95). His education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and his disillusionment over British complicity with the Natives Land Act (1913) prepared him for strong racial nationalism as a Garveyite, as editor of the ICU *Workers Herald*, and as leader of the Cape Town ANC in the 1920s.

*The Americans Are Coming!* is a major contribution to the study of global Garveyism, and a stunning first volume on the history of Garveyism in Africa. It is also a significant piece of African diaspora and Atlantic world scholarship that places Africa at the center, a paradigm we rarely see. Perhaps the most difficult task

confronting Vinson was drawing a straight and conclusive line from Garveyism to the ANC and the global anti-apartheid movement. I applaud his deep archival research to establish the importance of Garveyite ideology to the intellectual history of South African liberation struggles, and I also tend to agree that there is more of a contribution there than has been recognized or recorded. As with the local history scholarship on the modern civil rights movement in U.S. history or subaltern studies of Indian nationalism in South Asian history, the grassroots organizers and local movements will be harder to identify and will take longer to document. Nevertheless, complicating and enriching the longer history of the South African struggle is necessary and inevitable. Vinson has shined a light on Garveyism and convincingly cemented its place in South African history.

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