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MAPPING RACE: Historicizing the History of the Color-Line

ABSTRACT:

This essay examines scholarship about the global color-line. It unfolds in two sections. The first traces how understandings of race and racism were encoded within university environments in the mid-twentieth century. The second shows how this epistemology influenced early academic comparisons of the United States and South Africa in the 1980s and why the literature diversified in the post-apartheid era.

We are in a unique moment of intellectual upheaval. The reference points and narratives that largely shaped scholarly understandings of human interaction through most of the twentieth century have buckled in recent decades—questioned, subverted, and reformulated by academics and laypeople alike, all eager to adjust staid explanations of the political present and historical past. This tumult has transformed the historical discipline in palpable and ethereal ways. Regardless of subfield, historians are being asked today to rethink categories of nationalism, culture, and territoriality, and reconsider how such frameworks helped institutionalize assumptions that made the messiness and interconnectivity of the past less discernable to those tasked with its preservation. The nation, once treated as an omnipotent organizing principle of historical inquiry, has emerged from this milieu on the defensive, pursued by cosmopolitans who, while respectful of its power, are eagerly shining light on the crevices, connections, and contradictions of the global past.ⁱ

This historiographical essay looks at the effects of these upheavals from a particular vantage point. It explicates the epistemological evolution and the imaginative geography of a transnational narrative both bigger and less discrete than the nation: the story of the color-line. Open nearly any textbook today and W.E.B. Du Bois's famous dictum that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" invariably frames and animates discussions of racial discrimination and nonwhite activism. What was this color-line and how have historians studied it? It has been treated, more often than not, as a metaphor for those left behind and excluded in the nation's unyielding march toward modernity—the line of conflict where nonwhites

fought back against the linearity of the European mind and the discriminatory blind spots of national development. Like any other narrative, this story has developed its own self-referential terminologies and updated itself with time, and provided historians with essential guideposts to understand world affairs.

My effort here is fairly focused. Rather than examine the infinitely large body of work on transnational discrimination and resistance, this essay looks tightly at a singular topic: scholarship on South Africa's place in the world. The conceptual lodestar of work on global racism, South Africa—and the apartheid question more specifically—has guided a particular research agenda for nearly half a century, pushing historians in different fields toward a similar set of inquiries, assumptions, and intellectual imperatives. The result has not only been a uniquely specific map of South Africa's "proper" place abroad, but also a surprisingly unified vision of what racism is, where it came from, and how it transformed world history in the twentieth century. This map remains influential in our modern era, attaching meaning to international resolutions and weight to public discourse, even as the reference points that gave *it* life erode slowly in the face of the "New" South Africa and the "post-Cold War" world. Decoding the scholarship on South Africa in the world—uncovering its fault lines and support beams and how it evolved—offers an excellent pathway for better understanding the origins, complexities, and contradictions of the color-line narrative.

GLOBALIZATION OF COLOR

Recreations of the color-line's intellectual genealogy begin most often in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As historian Robin Kelley explains, the concept emerged in tandem with pan-Africanism in the Atlantic world. Cited often as the idea's progenitor, W.E.B. Du Bois's widely read *The Souls of Black Folk* coined the phrase in 1903, and his 1906 *Collier's Weekly* article on European colonialism—as well as his efforts as the editor of *The Crisis* from 1910 to 1934—helped cement the notion that U.S. racism was simply a local manifestation of the global problem of racism. In a world where definitions of modernity remained tethered to white cultural triumphalism and imperial conquest rationalized by pan-European nationalism, Du Bois's vision broke a range of epistemological barriers. In a word, he advocated a diasporic form of national consciousness among Africa's descendents that overturned colonial representations of blackness.ⁱⁱ For Kelley and other students of early pan-African thought, this nationalism was nonterritorial in nature, animated by an attempt to “locate, no matter how mythical, a single culture with singular historical roots” that rejected European discrimination and celebrated the intrinsic value of nonwhite people in the Americas and Africa.ⁱⁱⁱ

Du Bois's writings resonated, in part, because his arguments were so familiar to his contemporaries. By the time *Souls of Black Folk* was published, Caribbean activist Henry Sylvester Williams had already organized a pioneering network of transatlantic African thinkers, and by the interwar period Marcus Garvey and Carter Woodson were infusing Du Bois's theses with new energy and gusto. As Jason Parker expertly shows, the connections between these activists and scholars were eclectic and multifarious.

Nurtured often in urban nodes like Harlem and London and intellectual institutions like Lincoln and Howard universities, black politicians and writers thrived within “a kind of intellectual hothouse and safehouse,” unimaginable in white society, that accelerated the promulgation of a coherent alternative to European teleologies of progress, imperialism, and modernity.^{iv} Hubert Harrison, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, and Langston Hughes, as well as young African leaders like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, and Julius Nyerere functioned as the interpersonal synapses of this world. They disagreed with eloquent conviction from time to time, but rallied together toward a vision of race and racism that both embraced the common threads of the black experience and castigated the trappings of global white supremacy. Framed by a conceptual binary that pitted race against empire, commonality and criticism formed the pillars of the nascent color-line narrative.^v

For reasons discussed later, this transatlantic story has garnered enormous scholarly attention in recent years. Less recognized but no less significant is the story of how the color-line concept seeped through the ivory walls that divided black internationalists from their white academic contemporaries. Although U.S. higher education remained segregated throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, the arguments of Du Bois and others made fascinating intellectual inroads in this period. Melville J. Herskovits was a big part of the reason. An American anthropologist trained at Columbia University under Franz Boas in the interwar years, Herskovits was the founder of the first major academic program in African studies in the United States and a key player in the movement to replace scientific racism with cultural relativism in the

mid-twentieth century, an effort that culminated with UNESCO's race statement in 1950.^{vi} As Kelley acknowledges, anthropologists like Herskovits were "central to the first wave of diaspora studies."^{vii} Through ethnography and scientific analysis they extended a bridge toward pan-Africanists by challenging the racial specificity of nationalism, directly equating "modern" European social structures to the cultural patterns found in societies in Africa, Asia, and beyond.

Herskovits's most famous book, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), applied Boasian anthropology to the African American experience. Heralded at the time as the definitive scholarly assessment of black society in America, the professor's argument overlapped closely with the conclusions of Du Bois and other black thinkers—because culture was synonymous with nationhood and black American culture had more in common with "Africa" than "America," it followed that black America, conceived in monocultural terms, would remain culturally distinct from mainstream white America for the foreseeable future.^{viii} The argument served, at the time, as a Rorschach test for all sorts of groups who were apathetic about the prospect of full racial assimilation in the United States. White segregationists and black activists, embracing opposite arguments about the worth of African culture, converged on Herskovits's latent premise that African heritage gave blacks everywhere a unique and unified cultural value-system.^{ix} This underlying assumption, in the meantime, found itself reified politically as African elites—trained within a uniquely transatlantic milieu—took the reins of government in Africa in the late 1950s. Ghana's President Kwame Nkrumah pointed specifically to Herskovits's belief "that the Negro of America had in no way lost his cultural contact with the African

continent,” as proof of African nationalism’s epistemological authority and legitimacy in the cold war era. By the onset of second-wave decolonization, the political project of pan-racial unity was effectively married to the structuralism of Boasian ethnography.

These intellectual linkages grow more interesting when placed alongside Herskovits’s activities outside the ivory tower. Besides working assiduously to delegitimize any colleague who tried to contradict his interpretation of race, it turns out the Northwestern professor—like so many of his black contemporaries living in Harlem, Atlanta, London, and beyond—was active in formulating the early U.S. argument against South Africa’s system of apartheid. The professor offered frequent testimony to Congress on the importance of majoritarian rule in Africa—framed, again, in holistic, monocultural terms—and pressured members of the State Department’s newly formed African Bureau to accept the inevitability of decolonization in southern Africa. His arguments flowed naturally from his scholarship: (1) culture formed nationhood, and (2) black South Africans were numerically preponderant in South Africa, therefore (3) African majority rule was morally just, culturally appropriate, and politically inevitable. W.E.B. Du Bois had the undeniable honor of introducing Kwame Nkrumah to the U.N. General Assembly as the “undisputed voice of Africa” in 1960, but it was Herskovits who explained these events to students, colleagues, and policymakers in the world’s most influential empire. Together the two men formed the dual engines of an epistemological revolution that reshaped scholarly understandings of race and racism in American higher education in the mid-twentieth century.

Du Bois and Herskovits both died in 1963 and viewed from a distance, especially by a readership that subsequently made the social and cultural “turns” in the 1980s, many of their ideas seem dated. However, as historical figures, the two men left very large footprints. Their ability to fuse a healthy respect for pan-African unity with criticism of pan-European racism—framing apartheid, in the process, as the antithesis of the cultural relativism that undergirded ascendant understandings of race—had long-lasting implications. At the conceptual level, the color-line emerged as a common identity shared by people with ancestral links to Africa and a mutual political project aimed at dismantling the obstacles to black unity, social development, and cultural well-being. It was the boundary, in other words, where those who embraced race unity confronted those who compelled race superiority. A constellation of theorists and writers in various fields are now interrogating this unique roadmap, highlighting the various ways it has reinforced essentialist binaries like power/resistance and blackness/whiteness, but the point here is that a huge number of scholars, politicians, and laypeople accepted its basic tenets in the mid-twentieth century.^x

As African studies departments proliferated in the United States, combining in many cases to form African and African American studies departments, a diverse array of individuals began engaging the color-line narrative. New scholars eagerly updated, debunked, and revised the content of earlier work, moving in the process away from Boasian cultural relativism toward trendier models of symbolic anthropology, but this overarching vision of race and racism—in particular the notion that pan-African identity and resistance to white discrimination were mutually constitutive—continued to elicit

institutional support and animate research and political agendas in American academia.^{xi} By the onset of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements, this racial map had practically become conventional wisdom. Pick up one of the many fine books on U.S. anti-apartheid activism in the cold war, written more often than not by a participant in the anti-apartheid movement trained in an African studies or African and African American studies department in the 1970s or 1980s, and the story seems surreally rhythmic: the university provided the training and physical space for intellectual exchange among Africanists, and the apartheid issue offered the inspiration that directed intellectual exchange toward political activism—with the global color-line idea, in the process, growing ever more instinctive and natural.^{xii} Historian Leonard Thompson put his thumb on this dynamic in a 1992 article, entitled “The Study of South African History in the United States,” when he explained that South African specialists in America were torn perpetually in the second half of the twentieth century by their “scholarly obligation to be as objective as possible” and their “social responsibility . . . to use their knowledge to combat the evil of apartheid.” The cumulative effect, in Thompson’s words, were projects “that shed light on the causes and effects of racism in South Africa” and highlighted “the comparability of South African history with the history of other countries.”^{xiii}

COMPARING THE COMPARERS^{xiv}

It should come as no surprise, against such a protracted backdrop, that the initial crop of monographs on South Africa’s place in the world—works that brought the global color-line concept into the realm of Historical Knowledge—were published in a two year

period in the early 1980s, as the anti-apartheid movement took off on U.S. college campuses after the Soweto riots of 1976. The big guns included George Fredrickson's *White Supremacy* (1981), John Cell's *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy* (1982), Stanley Greenberg's *Race and State in Capitalist Development* (1980), and Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson's edited *The Frontier in History* (1981), each of which adopted a particular comparative approach and focused on an alternative period and theme. Whereas Fredrickson analyzed the evolution of racial segregation in the American South and South Africa across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Cell focused on the early twentieth century and how this segregation turned to institutionalized discrimination in both countries—a stark contrast from Greenberg, a political scientist, who theorized a relationship between racial exploitation and capitalist development in South Africa, Alabama, Israel, and Ireland, and Lamar and Thompson, who used the theme of frontier conflict to frame a collection of essays on race relations in North America and South Africa over several centuries.^{xv}

One could spend an entire graduate seminar exploring the content, similarities, insights, and differences between these very fine works. Predictably, however, my argument is much less ambitious.^{xvi} In a nutshell, each book systematized knowledge about a story with preexisting appeal and authority, effectively legitimizing and reifying the geography of the color-line for an audience already primed to accept its existence as factual. The result was not only copious accolades for the authors, but a more uniform, historically grounded understanding of categories like race and racism. South Africa's existence in the world became linked to Jim Crow in the United States, with the actions

of white South Africans equated to the behavior of American segregationists and the fate of the anti-apartheid movement tied implicitly to that of the civil rights struggle. This narrative, pitting demagogical, anachronistic white racists against History itself, erected ever higher walls around the Du Bois/Herskovits conceptual paradigm while cementing the color-line as both the physical place where the fight against racism unfolded and the idea that its scope was global. By the mid-1980s, scholars who were divided bitterly over the interpretive relationship of race and class were nonetheless treating transnational racial solidarity—defined always against the backdrop of the apartheid question—as an assumed given, and using the university’s institutional resources to actively promote the isolation of the South African government. Janus himself could not have imagined a more apt, paradoxically coherent arrangement.

This scholarship crystallized with Paul Gordon Lauren’s *Power and Prejudice* (1988). Composed exquisitely, the book offered the grand narrative of Du Bois’s great problem, retelling the story of the twentieth century as the fight against white racism. Lauren drew a sharp line between “racial” and “racist” historical factors, connecting the former to perceptions of shared identity (ie. pan-Africanism, pan-Arabism, and pan-Asianism) and the latter to perceptions of superiority based on skin color (ie. pan-Europeanism).^{xvii} The knotted complexities, inconsistencies, and contradictions surrounding the usage of these terms in the global arena, in the meantime, went largely unexamined, as the existence of declarations, resolutions, and conferences on Race—not the visceral debates over word choice, tone, and content therein—became self-evident proof of the color-line story’s intrinsic historical stability. The resulting narrative

connected the dots between the anti-imperialism movement and the fight against apartheid, providing a linear, progressive map of world history where nonwhite activism heightened awareness of discrimination's consequences, which in turn led to European decolonization, American civil rights reform, and the contemporary fight against apartheid.^{xviii}

The criticism of the comparers and their compatriots, when it came, broke down along two distinct lines. For many historians, the problem with this nascent scholarship was not the story itself but the characters examined. The global color-line needed True African and African American voices so that History could understand better the dynamic interplay between power and resistance, and comprehend fully the heroism of those who opposed white supremacy.^{xix} For a smaller group of scholars the problem was a bit murkier. Frederick Cooper, in a review of Fredrickson's subsequent comparison of black freedom movements in the United States and South Africa,^{xx} captured the essence of the conundrum well: "One can hardly disagree with calls for sacrifice, justice, inclusiveness, and mutual acceptance, but by placing himself in the pulpit Fredrickson"—and by extension the larger color-line phylum—"loses sight of who is in and who is not in the congregation. . . . [a]nd what is hardest to see from the pulpit is the preacher himself, to see the insights and the blind spots around the sermonizing, neo-abolitionist rhetoric."^{xxi} All of which amounted to a very plain accusation: Fredrickson was biased. He and his intellectual brethren believed in a world where good people stopped bad things, racism sat opposite liberal cosmopolitanism, and discrimination was on the run, with apartheid the lone holdout in the most important movement of the twentieth century.

Check the date on this latter lamentation and the elephant in the room rears its ironical head. Cooper's review, entitled "Race, Ideology, and the Perils of Comparative History," was published in 1996—six years after Nelson Mandela's release from prison and two years after South Africa's first fully democratic election. Which meant that one half of the color-line's *raison d'être*—the part contingent on the real-time "Otherness" of apartheid—was gone, and with it, potentially, the glue that made the color-line narrative so persuasive, instinctive, ubiquitous, and True. What was a scholar to do? For Cooper, in the same review, the future was James Campbell's *Songs of Zion* (1995), a book that stood out "as a historically grounded approach to the study of what Paul Gilroy called the 'Black Atlantic.'"^{xxii} Well-researched and engagingly written, Campbell's work explored how African Methodist Episcopal churches in South Africa built concrete relationships with black communities in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, explicating not the objective existence of transcontinental "white discrimination" and "black resistance," but the linkages, pathways, and processes that made such concepts feel so objectively real.^{xxiii} The shift was subtle and the effects profound. By approaching the color-line concept from the ground-up and studying the connections underlying processes of identity formation, *Songs of Zion* offered an imaginative new roadmap to reexplore a well-trod intellectual landscape.

Cooper's reference to Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) was neither accidental nor insignificant. Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, read widely in the mid-1990s, used literary analysis and sociological theory to explore how various well-known black intellectuals—

Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison, among others—wrestled with their local, national, and hemispheric identities in the twentieth century. In the process of weaving together these disparate stories, the book effectively rejected Boasian absolutisms that tethered race to tradition and cultural continuity, and promoted instead a model of black hybridity and multiculturalism, posited on the existence of an imagined pan-African intellectual universe beyond the nation-state.^{xxiv} This approach separated Gilroy from both the Geertzian cultural structuralists who tended to view culture in local unitary terms, and the poststructural theorists who emphasized either (a) hegemonic discourse’s power over oppressed plebeians everywhere; (b) the inherent relativism of all forms of analysis; or (c) some complex, jargon-laden combination of the two, involving various constructed definitions of power, self, meaning, and subjectivity. *Black Atlantic*, in other words, opened Pandora’s box. It showed that scholars could study race and how it shaped understandings of difference and identity in the global arena without falling into narrative formulas that drew stark lines between power/resistance or blackness/whiteness. Gilroy’s work, in short, outlined a color-line for the post-apartheid era.^{xxv}

Other literary scholars quickly joined this conceptual movement, deepening Gilroy’s insights in creative new ways. Rob Nixon’s *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood* (1994), for instance, looked at how South Africans and Americans imagined, appropriated, and repackaged each other’s cultural markers between 1948 and 1994. The goal, according to Nixon, who in turn quoted Gilroy, was to explain the dynamic interplay between “local action” and “global thinking.” The color-line was

not a static line of confrontation but a fluid zone of cultural contestation, existing within and beyond the nation-state, expressed through mediums like literature, music, television, film, photography, art, and theater. Nixon's book highlighted the refracted nature of the apartheid conversation within this zone—how it simultaneously formed the basis of transcontinental racial unity and the starting point for cross-cultural miscommunication. American media outlets, for instance, embraced the moral clarity of anti-apartheid activism, but wrestled rarely with the differences between guerilla actions in South Africa and non-violent efforts in the United States. The resulting dynamic helped flatten and universalize global anti-apartheid discourse and subsume the particularities of local protest, even as local activism and its multifarious particularities continued to provide the rationale for global interest in apartheid.^{xxvi}

This idiom of local action and global thinking animated the contributions of many U.S. civil rights historians as well. An entire constellation of books engaged the muddled nexus between the civil rights movement and African decolonization in the late 1990s and early 2000s, including Brenda Gayle Plummer's *Rising Wind* (1996), Penny Von Eschen's *Race Against Empire* (1997), Mary Dudziak's *Cold War Civil Rights* (2000), James Meriwether's *Proudly We Can Be Africans* (2002), Thomas Borstelmann's *The Cold War and the Color Line* (2002), Carol Anderson's *Eyes Off the Prize* (2003) and Kevin Gaines's *American Africans in Ghana* (2006), among others.^{xxvii} Fractured along methodological lines of social, cultural, political, and legal history, these works coalesced nonetheless toward a comparable vision of historical process. The transatlantic connections that supported the color-line narrative, in the United States at least, were

never static—they were built, adjusted, and policed across time. Even as the federal government actively tried to control how the world perceived Jim Crow and decolonization—a story explicated with élan by Dudziak and Borstelmann—African Americans found creative ways of building material and cultural relationships with their compatriots across the Atlantic, as evidenced in *American Africans in Ghana* and *Race Against Empire*. Interpretive differences aside, from a distance these works offered a portrait of a fluid yet meaningful color-line that could be constructed and reified by individuals and institutions in ways that overlapped with local needs, broad intellectual imperatives, and transnational pathways. Du Bois and Herskovits, once the doyens of all things Africa, now sat as singular individuals—surrounded by admittedly influential groups of peers with noteworthy institutional authority—in an ocean of interlocking human narratives.

Another group of scholars took an alternative approach, focusing on the connections, pathways, and relationships that built the cross-continental category of whiteness. The hybridity and fluidity of nonwhite experiences, while important, existed against the backdrop of a larger, linear story of hegemonic cultural power in the global arena. Drawing on theories articulated first by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, and utilized prominently in monographs by David Roediger and Matthew Frye Jacobson, these historians—Gerald Horne, Larry Grubbs, and George White, as well as Alfred López, Melissa Steyn, Marilyn Lake, and Henry Reynolds—explored how white policymakers and citizens laid claim to categories of modernity in ways that cast Africans and African Americans in opposition to development.^{xxviii} Racial supremacy was

replaced, in this process, by notions of whiteness that were more benign but equally oppressive. For supporters, this scholarship reintroduced the all-important question of power to the color-line conversation by highlighting how epistemological categories distributed resources, discriminated against peoples, and continued traditions of white power.^{xxix} For less sympathetic readers, whiteness studies reestablished the reductionism of the “binary trap” by placing cages around historical agents and painting over moments of imaginative pluralism and multi-directionalism in the globalized world.^{xxx}

Whiteness scholarship, irrespective of such criticism, underscored the ongoing conceptual importance of South Africa to the narrative of the global color-line. Just as the existence of apartheid pushed early Africanists and historians toward terminologies and definitions that mirrored contemporary debates about the Republic, recent scholars have not been able to escape the specter of the National Party’s prolonged hold on power. Perhaps the greatest irony of the color-line conversation, therefore, is that so few of the contributors have been from South Africa. As early as 1987, historian Shula Marks observed that scholarship on South Africa and the United States was inherently lopsided. The tendency of such “works [to emanate] from the American side of the Atlantic,” she opined in a review of Cell and Fredrickson, often led to certain interpretive fallacies and highlighted “that in South Africa itself so much more still remains to be done at the rock face of historical enquiry.”^{xxxi} Without archival heavy-lifting in the Republic, the story of the global color-line would remain open to distortion and exaggeration by historians with Americentric interpretive agendas and political proclivities.^{xxxii}

South African scholars have responded in unique ways in recent years. Peter Alexander and Richard Halpern's edited *Beyond White Supremacy* (1997), for example, updated South Africa-United States comparisons in the late 1990s using primary source analyses from scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, while Ran Greenstein's edited *Comparative Perspectives on South Africa* (1998) redirected the comparative agenda toward themes of identity formation and indigenous economic development.^{xxxiii} The contributions in both volumes deepened knowledge about the similarities and differences between the United States and South Africa, and offered insightful assessments of cross-national labor, cultural, and political experiences. Andrew Offenburger, Christopher Saunders, and Scott Rosenberg, too, moved this comparative project forward with a transatlantic journal entitled *Safundi* based solely on the study of the "two-way mirror" between South Africa and the United States, which has elicited a host of excellent contributions on literature, labor, economics, and politics over the past decade.^{xxxiv}

Collectively, these efforts have been thoughtful and sophisticated but not immune to criticism. Two interlocking weaknesses persist. First, although useful in isolating points of commonality and divergence, recent comparative analyses often treat historically specific constructs as universal and self-evident, using categories like the nation and development as anchors to stabilize sometimes deceptive interpretive jumps across time and place.^{xxxv} This methodological flaw has both downplayed the dynamics at the heart of works by Campbell and Nixon, and reflexively returned the color-line conversation to its apartheid era homeostasis. Closely related, this scholarship rarely reflects on the pathways that originally made the United States-South Africa comparison so compelling. As

demonstrated here, the story of the color-line has a past—one that has imposed particular blind spots and epistemological assumptions on the historical record by linking understandings of race and racism to contextual debates on civil rights and apartheid, and particular theories of culture and nationalism. As the color-line conversation grows more international and pluralistic, scholars should not only deepen the source-base of their work, but also interrogate the naturalness of these older linkages. How did Africans appropriate and reformulate transatlantic terminologies? What did these discursive variations reveal about the global world? How did moments of cross-continental consensus overlap with periods of contradiction and confusion?

Some of the most imaginative recent efforts, indeed, have tried to recast South Africa's place in the world. Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject* (1996), for instance, frames apartheid in the context of European indirect rule in Africa, arguing that binaries of whiteness/blackness, with their inherent tendency to amplify the importance of race and racism, actually masked the dynamics of late colonialism. The legacy of European rule—in South Africa as well as the rest of the African continent—was not the formation of race segregation, but the conceptual line established between urban cosmopolitanism and rural tribalism, which segmented African populations and reproduced European modes of thinking, particularly in the form of chiefly rule in rural areas.^{.xxxvi} By shifting the axis of interpretation away from the United States, Mamdani reconceptualized the terms of the color-line narrative itself. The fight against racism, spearheaded by specific groups of intellectual elites from Harlem, London, and elsewhere in the Atlantic world, actually encoded an understanding of the nation, modernity, and

freedom that erased and delegitimized subaltern African experiences in rural areas and urban centers, setting the stage for many of the tortured ambiguities of the postcolonial era.

In contradistinction, other historians have placed South Africa's experiences firmly in the context of settler colonialism. James Belich's *Replenishing the Earth* (2009), for instance, widens the color-line framework by connecting it to the "Angloworld" in the American West and the British dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Using an environmental perspective, Belich looks at urban nodes like New York, London, Chicago, and Melbourne to uncover the pathways and relationships that propelled the growth of pan-European social and economic norms. The global debate over race and racism, in Belich's telling, developed directly in response to the excesses of this English-speaking universe.^{xxxvii} *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century* (2005), an edited volume by Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen, arrives at a comparable conclusion from an alternative direction. Focused broadly on the contradictions of settler experiences, the book uses a series of case studies to explicate how colonial rule institutionalized color discrimination in southern Africa, Algeria, Palestine, and the Pacific Rim. The color bar, in this retelling, grew naturally from Europe's larger effort to influence the land, labor, and cultural policies of the non-Europeans under imperial rule.^{xxxviii}

CONCLUSIONS

Although few scholars deny the ongoing relevance of Du Bois's now century old dictum, the terms and definitions that once gave the color-line's self-evident meaning in and outside academia are being reconsidered, reassessed, and redefined—part of a larger attempt by intellectuals everywhere to move beyond the linearity of older narratives and wrestle with the full complexity of our global age. This essay has worked to explicate both how and why the scaffolding of the color-line narrative changed in the late twentieth century. Where will historiography on this topic go in the future? On the one hand, certain divisions will undoubtedly continue to animate the literature. Differences between students of transnational whiteness and black cosmopolitanism, for instance, will likely continue to reflect much deeper questions of theoretical choice, subject matter, and interpretive temperament, and the fight over comparative history's utility will certainly persist in the future. On the other hand, however, it seems entirely likely that chroniclers of the global color-line will merge some of their efforts with historians of empire in the coming years. The conclusions of Mamdani, Belich, and others have validity, and in recent years Frederick Cooper, Ann Stoler, and countless others have begun relocating and subsuming examinations of race and racism within the empire's complex, contradictory journey in the twentieth century.^{xxxix} South Africa is a critical part of this story. Isolated rhetorically yet integrated economically in the Western world, it—and the apartheid debate it inspired—rallied opinions throughout the second half of the 1900s, attaching particular meanings to words like race, nation, and justice, while pushing alternative narratives into the shadows and crevices of the global community. In this

moment of intellectual upheaval, the story of South Africa will undoubtedly remain a lodestar—and an anchor for understanding the intersection of imagined communities, grand strategies, and material surroundings in the twentieth century.

Endnotes

i For reflections on this change, see Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002); C.A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol and Patricia Seed, "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History," *American Historical Review* 111:5 (December 2006), 1441-1464; David Thelen, "The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History," *Journal of American History* 86 (December 1999), 965-75. Useful texts include, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Second Edition* (New York: Verso, 1991); Charles Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *American Historical Review* 105:3 (2000), 807-831; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2005); Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); A.G. Hopkins, *Globalization in World History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002).

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vii Robin Kelley, "How the West Was One: The African Diaspora and the Re-Mapping of U.S. History," *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 127.

viii Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941). See also Herskovits, "The Present Status and Needs of Afroamerican Research," *Journal of Negro History* 36:2 (April 1951), 123-147.

ix Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits*, xii.

x For recent update, see Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, Jed Esty, *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

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