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## Southern History Writ Larger

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As I gazed out the window of the Russian State Archives of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) into the gathering gloom that begins to cover Moscow at 2:30 on a November afternoon, I tried to imagine the southerners whom I had followed there as they explored the city over seventy-five years earlier. Did the North Carolina mountain boy Paul Crouch gasp when he entered the gilded lobby of the Hotel National, where I now stayed, one floor down from Lenin's room? Did black Texan Lovett Fort-Whiteman yearn for the baking heat of his *alma mater*, Tuskegee Institute, as he walked through the bitter cold to class at the University of the Toilers of the East in 1924? From tomatoes and butter beans to cabbage and beets, from breakfasts of hot buttered grits to *zavtraki* of cold hard boiled eggs, from white supremacy to a country where "social poison"—Russian for racism—was illegal, from listening to spiteful white men whistle *Dixie* to watching tender grown men cry as they sang *Mother Russia*, southerners' heads spun from the changes they encountered in the U.S.S.R. All sorts of southerners—Comer Vann Woodward, John Hope, Olive Stone, Clark Foreman, Paul Crouch, and Lovett Fort-Whiteman among them—went to the U.S.S.R. in the 1920s and early 1930s to evaluate Communism for themselves and to see the one place in the world that they imagined to be free of racial prejudice.<sup>[1]</sup>

One week after the 2000 election, I followed them to research their experiences with communism and communism's experiences with the South in the archives of the Anglo-American Secretariat of the Communist International. I knew that the Communist Party USA papers would soon open at the Library of Congress, so I confined my Russian research to Comintern material that depicted the South, attempted to place African Americans in a transnational context of people of color, and documented organizing southern workers. The contestation of the 2000 election must have been strange enough back home, but it was surreal to watch it unfold on CNN each morning as I ran on the treadmill in the Hotel National's spa, looking out over the Kremlin.

My quest to recapture the South from the Communist archives had been as circular as my Russian workout routine. It began in 1997 over dinner with Robert W. Cherney in Melbourne, Australia, when we were both visitors at the University of Melbourne. When I explained that I was at work at a book on southern radicals before the Civil Rights Movement, he remembered that the Soviet archives held many southern secrets. My resolve to go there was instantaneous, but turned out to be easily shaken. Many people discouraged me, pointing out the pitfalls that waited to assail me: unpredictable hours and days, uncooperative archival staff, limits on computers and the numbers of boxes one could pull, copies ordered, never to be delivered. In other words, this was Extreme Archiving, better left to those who would bring back documents to publish, which I could then use. But this process gave me pause, since I wasn't the sort that wanted pre-selected documents.<sup>[2]</sup>

Yet, I wasn't sure I could go and retrieve my own documents. I heard horrible stories of people who had paid thousands of dollars to get to RGASPI, only to find the archives closed . . . or, in other stories, open, but serving up only three or four boxes each week. It was cold, dirty (take your own toilet paper, email lists warned), and you might come home empty handed. Or, you might not come home at all. Stories abounded of people being kidnapped on their way from the airport into Moscow. If you came home, your money might stay. That year many tourists stuck their ATM cards into fake machines that simply kept their card, took their credit information, and drained their accounts.

Daunted, I put the trip out of my mind for two years. One day I lectured on the 1929 Gastonia, North Carolina strike and mentioned that the Soviet archives, which I *had* hoped to visit, held accounts of the strike. When class ended, a young woman from Durham came forward, announced that she was writing her senior essay on the 1929 Gastonia strike, and demanded to know when WE were going to Moscow. We duly arrived at RGASPI in November, 2000, accompanied by a University of Florida undergrad whom my Durham student had picked up in the airport bar when she got bumped from her flight and won a free round trip ticket. The free ticket, of course, was a sign from God, so the Florida student ran home to get his guitar and Russian dictionary, assuring us that his two year study of the language would save us. Since the RGASPI finding aids were in Russian, our hired translator actually did save us.

Working in RGASPI turned out to be a pleasure. Every morning when the boyish, and heavily armed, security guards challenged my right to bring in a computer, I smiled, nodded vigorously, and repeated several times, "hey, how y'all doin'?" They smiled back and let me pass. Once inside, it was fun to fondle the enormous busts of Lenin that lined the halls, stored here after they had been stripped from the exteriors of public buildings elsewhere. Naysayers were spot on about the toilet paper shortage, but there was a fabulous cafeteria and an unending supply of boxes for the four of us. It was so cold in the reading room that we wore all of the clothes that we had brought with us at once, layer upon layer.

New questions, overlooked characters, and new conceptions of nation and region had sent me to Moscow, where I discovered that the Soviets had archived an enormous amount of material about the South and about African Americans. The Soviets saw the American South as a region toward which they needed distinct foreign policy. In twists and turns, they saw it as a nation. Soviet policy toward that nation sprang not from an ignorant attempt to force the South into an ill fitting Marxist garment cut along Stalinist lines; rather, black and white southerners interacted with people from around the world to forge the southern communist line. The first person whom black southerners sought out in Moscow in the 1920s was Sen Katayama, a powerful member of the Executive Committee of the Comintern. Katayama was a legendary Japanese radical who had attended Presbyterian Maryville College in Tennessee in the 1890s. "A small dark-brown man," Katayama was appalled at white supremacy and argued "the Negro problem has become a vital question of the world revolution." Or, as one black communist recalled, "'Old Man' Katayama knew all about white folks."<sup>[3]</sup>

To guide their southern strategies, the Soviets assembled a carefully researched and amazingly informative archive on southern conditions in the 1920s and 1930s (everything in the papers is in English, French, and German, though the finding aids are in Russian). I'll never forget finding a 1930 photograph of some workers standing on a corner in North Charlotte, a spot I recognized. Their loopy smiles and self-conscious poses recall a Sunday school picnic. But the signs that the delegates hold arrest the viewer who thought she knew something about the South: "Down with Fascist Terrorism and Anti Labor Legislation," "Abolish Lynching/End Discrimination Against Negro Workers," "Free All Class-War Prisoners," and the calmer, but no less astonishing, "We Greet the Workers of the USSR." Sixty-odd years after that photograph was taken, when I took students on a tour of North Charlotte's mill villages, we crossed that very corner. Someone asked our tour guide, "Why didn't southern cotton mill workers have unions?" He answered, "Oh, they didn't want them because the owners were so good to them."

Imagine the questions that visitors might ask if that photograph appeared in an exhibition at Charlotte's Levine Museum of the New South.

When I was a UNC graduate student in the 1980s, those of us working on southern topics found that if we grouched a smidgen about the rigors of research, those working on national or international topics sighed, "Gee, all you have to do is walk over to the Southern!" But if we seek to write an international history, a national history, or even an interracial account of the South during the Jim Crow period, that statement isn't true. The Southern Historical Collection is a treasure, and I am proud that it is in my home state and at my *alma mater*. In that spirit, however, I want to explore its omissions and think about how those absences alter its account, hence, our accounts, of the South. I'll conclude with some suggestions for what the Southern Historical Collection might do now and in the future to remedy its lack of African American sources. I venture into this topic fully aware of the costs of raining on my host's parade. However, I am too proud of the Southern Historical Collection and of this university to forego this opportunity.

In my forthcoming (January 2008) book, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950*, I think about region as a state of mind as well as an actual place. I wanted to write an international history of the South that examined its permeable boundaries. I wondered if white southerners had expected to export Jim Crow to the world as they had exported slavery to the western United States. What did it mean when white southern cultural production—from Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* to Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary*—accumulated a plethora of Pulitzers in the 1920s for depictions of black southerners? In the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection at Yale University's Beinecke Library, I came upon a cache of clippings about Jim Crow taking hold in London and Paris. In Australia I read a conservative leader's reaction to the news that a touring jazz band of black musicians had taken Melbourne's white women by storm, and worse than that, out on dates. What was wrong with Australian men, he cried? In the American South the band members wouldn't live through the night, he pointed out, as he implored Australians to live up to the southern model of manhood. Yet, if white southerners thought that they had something to teach the world about managing black southerners, they found that their lesson did not go uncontested by those who escaped their management.

I recast the southern African Americans who made up the Great Migration as refugees, southerners forced to leave their homes for new locations, but who continued to be southerners and to defy Dixie from outside the region. The more that I learned about Harlem, Chicago, or Pittsburgh, the more I realized the immediacy of leave-taking and the relevance of the South for African Americans. Like expatriates and exiles from any place, they carried home in their hearts. Their southern-ness was a state of mind and a profound part of their identity. Tracing connections among people in the Harlem Renaissance, for example, one might more appropriately name it the Raleigh Renaissance, North.

If we write about a place that cleanses itself of dissent and omit the dissenters, we are left with a distorted view of its politics. If we write about a place that forces African Americans to leave it, we must extend its geographical boundaries to repatriate them and count them back into our regional history. How different would the Jim Crow South look, I wondered, if I included as characters those southerners who went beyond its boundaries to change it?

When I began work on my first book, *Gender and Jim Crow*, I did not allow myself to go to "white" sources until after I had located and thoroughly researched African American sources. In *Defying Dixie*, I began in archives outside of the South. I've used material from over thirty archives located on three continents, many, of course, with multiple collections of interest. Of that thirty-three, ten are in the South, and the Southern Historical Collection accounts for the largest number of collections I consulted

in a single place. But if I had “just walked over to the Southern,” as non-southernists imagined southern historians doing, I would be telling a radically different story.

The problem is that the Jim Crow South produced Jim Crow archives. To assess the level of damage from which we must recover, we can think about the cost of Jim Crow in at least two ways. First, we might ask which African American collections migrated North with their subjects. Might they have helped scholars write more complete histories of the region had they been included at the Southern? Of course, scholars were always free to travel to African American collections in the North, but the Southern Historical Collection’s vastness—its own sense of its comprehensiveness—argued against that. Then, apart from histories of the Great Migration itself, scholars who studied black southerners who had escaped the South most often wrote of them as urban northerners, emerging full blown on the streets of Harlem or Chicago. Second, we must acknowledge that valuable material vanished during the Jim Crow period and, because of the era’s legacy, remains elusive. If we are lucky that some prominent African Americans’ papers went to northern archives, we lack documentation on average black people—diaries, farm records, photographs, family correspondence—all of which the Southern can offer for white southerners.

To research African American history in archives comparable in scope to the Southern Historical Collection, one must follow a road that marks the ninety-year-old trail of black southerners, that is, I-95. Howard University, New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and Yale University hold the fruits of black expatriation. For example, at Howard, I read love letters that Kwegyir Aggrey sent from Africa to his wife in Salisbury, North Carolina. Aggrey of Africa (and Salisbury) wrote rich commentaries on life in Africa, transnational politics, and everyday life under North Carolina’s Jim Crow regime. Later, I sat dazzled in their elderly daughter’s living room in Salisbury, listening to her talk about how her infirmities kept her from getting up to the attic to the family trove not yet in archives. At the Schomburg, I found John Bruce, black columnist, breaking the story that Thomas Dixon, Jr., had a “black” half-brother, a fact that reorders our accounts of white supremacy. At Yale, in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, I followed Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston on a southern tour in the late 1920s, tracked James Weldon Johnson’s lifelong battle with southern lynching and segregation, and learned that southern white theaters banned King Vidor’s *Hallelujah*, the first black talkie.

Yet, the single most important collection for the Jim Crow era lies a bit further up I-95: the Pauli Murray Collection in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. A native of Durham, the great-great granddaughter of one of antebellum North Carolina’s foremost white men and trustee of the University of North Carolina, Pauli Murray is the Ur-North Carolinian. She took part in the two great social movements of the twentieth century, black civil rights and feminism. She was everywhere at the right moment. Many of you know the contours of her life, but you may not realize her close connections to this university. In 1938, Murray tried unsuccessfully to integrate UNC’s graduate program of social work. As the first black female Episcopalian priest, she preached her inaugural sermon on UNC’s campus at the Chapel of the Cross in 1977. In 1978, UNC Chancellor, Ferebee Taylor, who had been a freshperson when Murray tried to integrate the university forty years earlier, helped convince the university to offer Murray an honorary degree. She was overjoyed, until she learned that the university was playing hard ball with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, in its own desegregation settlement. Murray declined the degree.

Pauli Murray qualifies as the patron saint of southern historians, because she saved everything. She even saved unmailed letters and wrote commentaries on them to the future researchers, explaining why she had thought better of sending them. For decades, she clipped columns from Durham’s black newspaper,

*The Durham Times*, and splattered them with her own notes. With George Stoney, a white UNC graduate, she monitored the southern white student publications that Columbia University received as exchange copies, and they plotted their strategies in their margins.

Murray gave this incredible cache, not to the Southern Historical Collection, but to the Schlesinger Library. When UNC had excluded her in 1938, the registrar had told her, “members of your race are not admitted to the university.”<sup>[4]</sup> When Murray graduated as valedictorian of her Howard Law School class, she hoped to follow other Howard valedictorians to Harvard for a year of graduate study. There was one catch: before Pauli Murray, the valedictorian had always been a black man. Harvard told Murray, “you are not of the sex entitled to be admitted to Harvard Law School.”<sup>[5]</sup> Murray donated her papers to the Schlesinger because it is the only library dedicated to the history of women, but I like to think that she also wrote herself into Harvard’s history, just to spite them. If so, I wish that she had thought about getting even with UNC instead.

If Murray’s donation admitted her to Harvard in perpetuity, James Weldon Johnson had no relationship at all to Yale University, where his friend, Carl Van Vechten, deposited an enormous African American history collection in his honor. Van Vechten gathered the material during the same period that J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton built the Southern Historical Collection. Along with Johnson’s papers, Van Vechten secured collections from other black southern expatriates. Scholars have tended to use them in the context in which they were given: as documents of the Harlem Renaissance. But an increasing number of researchers have begun profitably to use them to write southern history.

James Weldon Johnson didn’t have a relationship with Yale, but he did have one with the University of North Carolina. In 1927, Howard Odum invited him to speak at the first meeting of the university’s Institute of Human Relations. Jointly planned by students and faculty, the biennial meetings involved “college men . . . thinking and speaking for a New South.” Johnson remembered that he “faced . . . groups of Southern white young men,” and “felt a greater desire to win them over than I had felt with any other group I ever talked to.” Ultimately, he judged, “I did.”<sup>[6]</sup> As the climax of his visit, Johnson addressed an open meeting of students and Chapel Hill residents and read his poem “Go Down Death.” Johnson remembered the visit as “one of the most interesting episodes in my whole career,” and recalled UNC as “the focus of the greatest liberal forces of the state.” But his account actually omits the most interesting episode of his visit.

At Johnson’s first lecture, Professor Howard Odum introduced him to the crowd in Memorial Hall as “Mister Johnson.” Instantly, J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, chair of the History Department, jumped to his feet and stalked out.<sup>[7]</sup> Hamilton spent “much time talking about the inferiority of the Negro” in his classes, one student recalled. He repeatedly told his students that the “Negro’s mind freezes at the age of twelve. And he never develops beyond the age of twelve.”<sup>[8]</sup> It was Hamilton who founded the Southern Historical Collection in 1930 and under his auspices, the Collection grew to two million items by 1948.

When we contextualize Hamilton’s ideas on race, he does not fare well. Howard Odum had written a dissertation seventeen years earlier that argued for black inferiority and biological determinism, but he had repudiated that argument by the time that he “Mistered” James Weldon Johnson. Researchers and professors who worked with Odum, for example, Guy and Guion Johnson, Rupert Vance, and Arthur Raper, rejected Hamilton’s ideas outright. Raper recalled much later, “I can’t remember when I thought segregation was good. I can’t remember ever thinking it was going to last.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Hamilton’s racial beliefs shaped the Southern’s collections in the most fundamental way: his “driving mission to create a comprehensive repository of southern manuscript materials,”<sup>[10]</sup> was limited to

collecting southern white people's manuscript materials. Today that legacy lingers in the absence of African American voices in the Southern Historical Collection from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement. Certainly, the numerous collections of liberal white southerners' papers provide much information on race *relations*, but using that material does not enable us to hear African American voices. There is nothing approximating the Pauli Murray or the James Weldon Johnson collections here.

I bring up this painful past because it shapes the way that southern history is written. Researching in the Southern, one finds few hints of black resistance to Jim Crow, even of black *people* during Jim Crow. That lack of evidence skews the way we read the white sources that abound here. To write southern history in the Jim Crow Era that includes African Americans as the actors they were, one must start elsewhere. The absence of African American sources in the Southern leads scholars to believe that they don't exist. When I began the dissertation that became *Gender and Jim Crow*, I characterized it as writing a political history of black southerners from disfranchisement to woman suffrage. Most often, people responded to that characterization with the warning: "well, you won't find any sources for that."

I did find sources, in usual and unusual places. The North Carolina Collection had a wealth of printed material because it gathered information on North Carolinians, black and white. So did the North Carolina Department of Archives and History. The formally segregated branch of the Raleigh public library sequestered clippings and memorabilia that they had found under someone's bed in three steel filing cabinets in the hall. The Moorland-Spangarn Collection at Howard University held manuscript collections on black North Carolinians, and people shared their scrapbooks with me. The Amistad Research Center in New Orleans and the Rockefeller Archive Center in New York provided a great deal of information on black education. Duke University's Charles N. Hunter collection was invaluable.

Writing *Gender and Jim Crow*, I used the Southern Historical Collection to document the white supremacy campaign through the perpetrators' eyes. In *Defying Dixie*, I focus on both black and white southerners who sought to alter or overturn Jim Crow, so I have used the Southern a great deal. Interviews in the Southern Oral History Project have been key to understanding those white southerners, and I've worked extensively in ten manuscript collections here.

Having missed out on collecting from prominent black figures in the Jim Crow era, it may still be possible to document the lives of average black southerners during that period. Those sources that I used at small historically black colleges, public libraries, and attics have yet to find archival homes. Some have gone missing. For example, at Livingstone College's library, I found the Minutes of the Salisbury Colored Women's Club in the drawer of an old bookcase. It seemed as if the minutes had lain undisturbed since the 1920s. Nearby, gathering dust on a storeroom shelf were the diaries of an AME Zion Bishop in which he recorded his daily experiences as a missionary to Africa in the 1870s. I didn't copy them, since there was no copy machine for researchers. Subsequent visitors report that they are unable to find either the minutes or the diaries. If the Southern Historical Collection could partner with historically black colleges across the South to preserve such manuscripts, we would all be richer.

The prospects are much brighter for documenting our own multicultural South. If the Southern Historical Collection could mount a major project to collect along themes such as migration into our area by Mexicans, Vietnamese, and South Asians, archivists would make contacts that would bear fruit for years to come. Yale recently began the Yale Indian Papers Project to find and preserve documents relating to Connecticut's Indian communities from contact to the present. UNC and the Southern might mount a similar project for the South. Moreover, it is crucial to contact distinguished African Americans like Mel Watt, Jim Ferguson, and Harvey Gantt, to name just three people I knew in one city, with an eye to getting their papers. I understand that the Southern has begun this work. I would urge you to use

these contacts to cast your nets more widely and to ask for their help in bringing in the papers of average black southerners.

As much as J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton erred on race, his zeal for collecting built a monument. His double legacy should impel us to be sure that the Southern Historical Collection becomes a genuinely “comprehensive repository of southern manuscript materials.” Pauli Murray thought that we were up to the task. In her 1977 sermon at the Chapel of the Cross, she declared her southern repatriation and brought her sense of history to bear on the region’s future. As she climbed up to the pulpit, she held her ex-slave grandmother’s bible. A bookmark of dried flowers, given to her by Eleanor Roosevelt, marked her scripture reading. She gazed up to the balcony where her great-grandmother had worshiped as a slave. As she began her sermon, she gripped a lectern engraved with the name of her white great-great aunt. Then Murray declared, “The good news today in our small corner of the planet is that the south is rising out of its own ashes . . . . Deep in our hearts, we believe that the American South will lead the way to the renewal of the moral and spiritual strength and to a sense of mission.”<sup>[1]</sup> As historians and archivists, our own sense of mission should include restoring the history of all southerners to southern history collections. Then future scholars may write large the history of Jim Crow and of our time.

## Notes

[1] Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (W. W. Norton & Company, forthcoming, January 2008), chaps. 1 and 3.

[2] The Annals of Communism series of Yale University Press has published several books of documents from the Russian archives.

[3] Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), 656 n. 5.

[4] Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 115; From Pauli Murray to P. B. Young, 13 January 1939, Folder 381, Box 15, in the Pauli Murray Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

[5] Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 239–44.

[6] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933; reprint, [New York]: Da Capo Press, 2000), 388; Will Alexander to James Weldon Johnson, 9 June 1927, Folder 9, Box 4, and “Negro Praises Spirit in State,” *Greensboro Daily Record*, 20 March 1928, clipping in scrapbook “Music, Art, September 1927–July 1928,” both in the James Weldon Johnson Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[7] Guy Benton Johnson and Guion Griffis Johnson. *Research in Service to Society: The First Fifty Years of the Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 36 recounts the incident, but does not identify Hamilton. Interview with Guion Griffis Johnson by Mary Frederickson, 28 May 1974 (G-29-3), 12, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, identifies Hamilton, but says the black guest was Charles Johnson. Perhaps Hamilton stalked out twice at the introduction of two different Mister Johnsons.

[8] Interview with Guion Griffis Johnson by Mary Frederickson, 28 May 1974 (G-29-3), 12.

[9] Interview with Arthur Raper by Morton Sosna, 23 April 1971 (B-9-3), 23, 39, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[10] Laura Capell et al. *Southern Sources: An Exhibition Celebrating Seventy-Five Years of the Southern Historical Collection, 1930–2005* (Chapel Hill: University Library, 2005), x.

[11] Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 432–5.