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Robert T. Vinson

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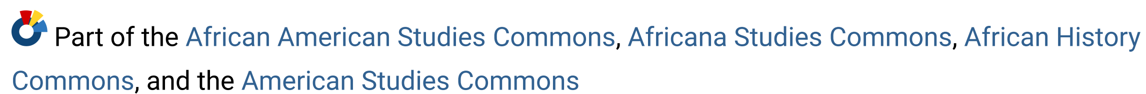

The Americans Are Coming!

Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa

Robert Trent Vinson

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Some material also has appeared in a different form in the author's "'Sea Kaffirs': American Negroes and the Gospel of Garveyism in Segregationist South Africa," *Journal of African History* 47, no. 2 (July 2006); and in "Providential Design: American Negroes and Garveyism in South Africa," from *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution,* edited by Michael O. West, William G. Martin, and Fanon Che Wilkins. Copyright © 2009 by the University of North Carolina Press. Used by permission of the publisher. www.uncpress.unc.edu

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The Americans Are Coming!

In the mid-1920s, the South African minister Daniel William Alexander, the son of a Cuban father and a shipbuilder who fought for the British in the South African War (1899–1902), complained that the segregationist laws of South African prime minister James Hertzog were "anti-native" and asserted that blacks worldwide had "long needed a leader like the Hon. Marcus Garvey."[1] The Jamaican-born, American-based Garvey had founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)—the largest black-led movement in world history, with over a thousand divisions in forty-three countries and more than a million followers across the globe. South Africans like Alexander devoured copies of Garvey's newspaper, the *Negro World*, and wrote hundreds of letters to the paper praising American Negroes and prophesying an "Africa for Africans," free from white colonial rule.[2]

Alexander led the South African branch of the African Orthodox Church, founded by the Antiguan-born George McGuire. McGuire was also the UNIA chaplain-general and the author of two critical UNIA texts—the *Universal Negro Catechism*, which claimed that God had ordained the UNIA to "redeem" Africa, and the *Universal Negro Ritual*, which contained nearly 150 hymns, prayers, and songs used during UNIA events. McGuire declared, "Garvey is a prophet," and he compared Garvey and oppressed blacks to Moses and the enslaved Israelites. Like Alexander, he believed Garvey was part of God's providential plan that had begun with the dispersal of millions of Africans from Africa and with slavery in the Western Hemisphere and would end with the triumphant return to Africa of diasporic blacks, sparking the regeneration of the continent.[3] Alexander and McGuire represent several themes that are discussed in this volume: the global nature of Garveyism, particularly

the indigenization and spread of Garveyism in South Africa; African disillusionment with white rule; Africans' admiration for—and hopes of achieving liberation through—American Negroes; and the role of religion and print culture in forging transnational identities and political linkages. Alexander and McGuire also demonstrate the nexus between Africans, West Indians, and African Americans; links between the UNIA and other organizations influenced deeply by Garveyism; and the persistent idea that the UNIA and American Negroes were divinely ordained to regenerate Africa.

In *The Americans Are Coming!* I argue that even though African Americans were subordinated in Jim Crow America, they were viewed by black South Africans as role models and potential liberators in their own battles against South African segregation. Africans were particularly attracted to an "up from slavery" narrative of African American success in the post–Civil War South, a narrative that was most closely associated with Booker T. Washington and African American singers and missionaries in South Africa. African American models of success disrupted a global color line constructed by whites worldwide, especially those in South Africa who claimed white rule was necessary to preserve modern civilization and usher blacks toward higher evolutionary development. The meteoric rise of Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association caused some Africans to believe that African Americans were not just role models but also imminent liberators. The UNIA and Garveyism flourished in South Africa even as the movement declined in America, sparking ever-increasing transnational ties between Africans and diasporic blacks. As Garvey lost control of the floundering American UNIA and struggled unsuccessfully to regain his former prominence, Africans continued to utilize Garveyism, their travels to America, and their ties to American Negroes to further a liberationist course that would, decades later, finally be fulfilled in the global antiapartheid movement.

Focusing primarily on the period 1890 to 1940, this book explores the ways in which many Africans embraced and manipulated the idea that American Negroes, as role models and liberators, were essential to their goal of African independence. Though Africans disagreed among themselves about the efficacy of the political, educational, and socioeconomic ideals of Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey, as well as the liberationist potential of American Negroes, they were in broad agreement that American Negroes were inspirational models of black success who proved blacks had the capacity to advance independent of white trusteeship. They admired their remarkable journey from slavery to freedom, their educational and socioeconomic advancement, their extraordinary cultural production, their urbane modernity, and their success in sport, which had the larger sociological implication of demonstrating what blacks could achieve if only given equal opportunities.

The book particularly demonstrates the kaleidoscopic nature of the Garvey movements in South Africa. There was no single South African Garvey movement. Garveyites in South Africa were the active agents, viewing Garveyism not as a fixed set of ideas but as a malleable ideology whose core ideals could be shaped and manipulated to advance different political, religious, educational, socioeconomic, cultural, and personal objectives. The result was many diffuse and decentralized South African Garveyisms, including many forms that would have been unknown and unrecognizable to Garvey himself. Metaphorically, the American Negro, like Marcus Garvey, became a modern-day Moses who would come to lead Africans out of a tyrannical Egypt and virtual slavery to the Promised Land of personal and political equality, education, and upward mobility. It was a dream that inspired and informed future leaders of South Africa, developed a global black consciousness, and spurred action that helped make the end of apartheid possible. But that dream also led to fantasy, despair, and disillusionment among black South Africans when Americans did not come to save them in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Atlantic world.

African Americans and Africans had profound cultural, linguistic, educational, and other differences that often led to misunderstandings, misplaced expectations, and mutual disappointment. However, their similar histories of hope, despair, and disillusionment, along with their shared aspirations to be full citizens of their respective countries and for blacks to control nations and be fully respected on the world stage, often bridged the gaps between the two peoples.

African American travelers to South Africa discussed and sang about the Middle Passage; about the 244 years of American slavery; about their hopes for full citizenship and equal justice after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation; and about the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments that outlawed slavery, bestowed citizenship to African Americans, and extended the franchise to African American men in the aftermath of the Civil War. These hopes had given way to despair and disillusionment due to the determination of whites to transform African Americans from slaves to landless, economically exploited sharecroppers; to disenfranchise them through poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses; and to terrorize them through racialized violence from white vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan, thousands of lynchings, and bloody coups such as that in Wilmington in 1898 that forced duly elected blacks and their allies from office. Blacks who served their country in the military during the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and World War I were subjected to harsh segregated conditions, constant doubts about their character and fitness to serve, and vicious attacks by whites determined to show black veterans that their valiant service would not lead to full citizenship in postwar society.

Africans, too, had suffered from profound hardships, including nineteenth-century conquests by whites, the development of racial segregation during the mineral revolutions of the late 1800s, disenfranchisement, subordinate agricultural roles, and the denial of citizenship rights despite their military service during the South African War. African idealizations of American egroes as role models and liberators peaked during particularly profound historical moments of disillusionment: the accelerated segregation during the mineral revolutions; the post–South African War British-Afrikaner pact that continued the disenfranchisement of most Africans; land dispossession and the lack of citizenship rights after the 1910 establishment of the Union of South Africa; and the 1929 "Black Peril" elections that proposed additional segregationist legislation, foreshadowing apartheid.

Although African diaspora studies have offered a more expansive framework for the study of continental Africa and the Americas, most works continue to center on diasporic blacks without attempting a substantial engagement with Africa and Africans.[4] By focusing on Africans as the active agents in the shaping and reshaping of the imagery of American Negroes and the diasporic ideology of Garveyism to resist segregation and white supremacy, this book demonstrates that blacks in South Africa were part of a two-way transatlantic traffic of peoples, institutions, and ideologies.[5] The book also goes beyond popular themes of migration, dispersal, and mobility to examine the intersection of politics, culture, education, sports, and religion in the ways that Africans indigenized the diasporic peoples, ideologies, and institutions in South Africa.[6]

I hope the book will be seen as groundbreaking in the recent renaissance in Garveyist studies that shifts the focus from Garvey and UNIA leadership to capture how blacks around the world shaped these ideologies of liberation in diffuse and differentiated forms to achieve local political objectives. Recent books by Mary Rolinson and Claudrena Harold examine Garveyism at local levels, particularly in the American South. And recent volumes of Robert A. Hill's *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers* reveal the depth of Garvey's impact in Africa. But virtually no scholarly monographs yet offer substantive accounts of Garveyism in Africa.[7]

By charting the hemispheric movement of black people, their ideas, and their institutions, *The Americans Are Coming!* moves South African historiography beyond its parochial borders. African peoples moved throughout South Africa, to the United States, and to Great Britain, and they engaged West Indian migrants to South Africa and the ideologies of the Jamaican Marcus Garvey, demonstrating clearly that they were not the passive, isolated tribal subjects that the South African government wished them to be. They made and unmade webs of power that included slavery and abolition, "civilizing" missions and "civilizing" imperialisms to fashion a dream of African liberation

that resonated throughout the world. In this way, too, the transnational dimensions of the story, emphasizing linkages between Africans and American Negroes, move beyond comparative South African history, which often considers national histories in parallel dimensions.[8]

The Americans Are Coming! explores the concept of transnational white supremacy, or a global color line, and theories of providential design—(notions that God enacted the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in America so that African-descended peoples could gain skills needed to liberate the African continent)—to reframe South African and American studies in transnational, not comparative, contexts. In the international context of the 1900 Pan-African Conference in London, W. E. B. Du Bois called the problem of the new century "the problem of the color line." He referred most obviously to a global color line represented by European colonialism in Africa and Asia—but also by American military expansionism in the Philippines and Cuba and by white supremacist regimes in the United States, South Africa, and other countries.

As early as 1896, Jan Smuts, South Africa's future prime minister and an internationally respected statesman who helped to found both the League of Nations and the United Nations, exemplified the fearful white racist sentiments that undergirded the black peril paranoia that eventually included American Negroes:

> At the southern corner of a vast continent, peopled by over 10,000,000 barbarians, about half a million whites have taken up a position, with a view not only to working out their own destiny, but also of using that position as a basis for lifting up and opening up that vast dead-weight of immemorial barbarism and animal savagery to the light and blessing of ordered civilization. Unless the white race closes its ranks in this country, its position will soon become untenable in the face of that overwhelming majority of prolific barbarism.[9]

There were two sides of the global color line, as South African whites like the author Maurice Evans and the educator C. T. Loram saw as they traveled through the American South to learn how Jim Crowism could be more effectively applied in South Africa. The rise of segregation in South Africa was part and parcel of a larger system of white supremacy that included the emergence of Jim Crowism in the United States and the continued racism, landlessness, and economic deprivation that afflicted many black West Indians.

Whites, particularly British whites, believed that they had charted their own "up from barbarism" narrative in the Roman Empire, whose subjects they had been, to attain a global empire of their own that ruled over subject darker races. This social Darwinist European march toward civilization

had taken several thousand years. To these new empire builders, the African journey toward civilization began with tutelage by European coloniali m and would also take thousands of years. The white missionary and educator James Stewart, who visited Tuskegee to adapt its industrial education model in order to produce Africans who would not seek political rights, rhetoricall a ked ri-cans who were demanding citizenship rights: "Starting but as ye terday in the race of nations, do you soberly believe that in the two generations of the very imperfect civilization you have enjoyed and partially accepted, ou can have overtaken those other nations who began that race two thou and years ago, and have been running hard at it for a thousand years at least?"[10]

Disillusioned with the white trustees of civilization, African mericans became alternate models of modernity. The stakes were high as blacks and whites debated the place of black people in the modern world. Could the Negro compete on the global stage? For Africans, the achievements of African Americans answered the question in the affirmative, then led to another: would blacks have the *opportunity* to compete on the global stage? Du Bois's evocation of a global color line exemplified the concerns of a transnational "talented tenth" that connected local struggles for racial equality with larger Pan-African consciousness and action. The linkages between American e-groes and black South Africans were part not only of an awareness of the parallels between American Jim Crowism and South African racial segregation but also of what white supremacist Lothrop Stoddard warned was a "rising tide of color," a growing identification with a global majority of people of color, including colonized and oppressed people in Africa, Ireland, India, and emerging nations like Japan.[11] Many black South Africans glimpsed their modern futures not in the faces of Europeans but in the faces of American egroes. The pathway toward modernity was through African America, not a white Europe that wanted Africans to remain an unchanging, rural-based migrant labor force yoked to a segregationist system designed to procure cheap labor.

Expanding links between Africans and American Negroes heightened the South African state's determination to maintain control over Africans politically and in other ways. And ironically, they helped accelerate segregationist legislation in the interwar years, when more laws to restrain Africans were passed than in the preceding one hundred years.[12]

Notions of providential design also facilitated this black transnational relationship, demonstrating the little-recognized fact of the centrality of religion to political struggle. The comparative historiography of South Africa and America has pushed the study of South African history beyond its long parochial tendencies, but comparative studies continue to treat religion and politics in South Africa (and in Africa generally) as operating in parallel universes that relate only infrequently with each other. *The Americans Are*

Coming! uses archival sources, newspapers, and oral interviews from Africa, England, and the United States to show the centrality of religion as one of the earliest—and one of the few—areas in which Africans themselves regained much autonomy and control over their lives. On some level, although it has not been reported by historians, Africans, government officials, and white civil society did understand that independent black religious institutions, fostered by American blacks and their white allies, would be precursors to demands for African political independence.[13]

Unlike white supremacists who viewed blacks as a problem to be countered, blacks in South Africa and in the Americas often viewed themselves as potential saviors who could redeem a modern civilization corrupted by exclusivist racism. The future of black people—and of modern civilization itself—was at stake in the struggle to eliminate the global color line. As white supremacists argued that the history of blacks began with their contact with white civilization, many blacks offered a more optimistic historical narrative that began with the grandeur of early Egyptian and Ethiopian civilizations. They cast themselves as modern-day Israelites with a covenantal relationship with God, who had allowed the ancestors of American Negroes to be subjected to centuries of slavery so that they could relearn high civilization from ascendant Europeans and return to Africa with the skills needed for the regeneration of the continent. Many African Americans interested in Africa—either in Christian missions, educational institutions, or liberationist designs—viewed their work as the ultimate fulfillment of God's providential plan, a plan that had begun with enslavement and dispersal. African Americans in particular engaged black South Africa as part of a divinely ordained mission to forge a decolonized Africa for Africans. The claims of providential design, along with notions of black modernity, comprised a unifying ideal among African-descended peoples across a wide spectrum, including many African Americans, black West Indians, and black South Africans.

Education, too, became a transatlantic channel as Africans increasingly, if still in small numbers, gained financial and other support to attend African American–based and white-led schools and universities. These institutions were models for starting schools of their own in South Africa and also a means through which to witness personally the progress and achievements, as well as the failures and suffering, of African Americans recently emerged from slavery.

Chapter 1 begins with the story of the Virginia Jubilee Singers, an American Negro singing troupe from Hampton Institute in Virginia whose five years in South Africa in the 1890s offered South Africans the first sustained depiction of African Americans' history and life. The Jubilee Singers espoused an "up from slavery" narrative that envisioned African American progress out of slavery into freedom and overturned the earlier images of dull-witted, enslaved

African Americans that had been conveyed in traveling minstrel shows. Africans pointed to Jack Johnson, the world's first black heavyweight champion (1908–1916) whose domination of white challengers was recorded on films that circulated in South Africa, as proof of blacks' capacity to be equal and even superior to whites if given a level playing field. For many whites in South Africa, Johnson exemplified the black peril of African Americans who supposedly disrupted interracial harmony and gave "unreasonable" aspirations to Africans. By World War I, the South African government banned virtually all American Negroes from entering the country. In their attempts to enter and remain in South Africa, American Negro missionaries discovered the global nature of the color line, but they also deepened religious, educational, and cultural links with Africans and, in the use of the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education, enhanced the powerful image of Booker T. Washington as the prototypical American Negro role model.

Chapter 2 details African disillusionment with white missionaries who claimed themselves and Christianity as "civilizing" liberators that would free society from supposed African pagan barbarism. But with the discovery of diamonds (in 1867) and gold (in 1886) in South Africa and the resultant rapid industrialization and urbanization, it was cheap, pliable African labor that was needed in order to exploit these minerals—not the Christianized, educated, enfranchised, propertied, and economically autonomous African citizenry that many missionaries had earlier claimed would be the desired outcome of their proselytizing. As white missionaries replicated white society's racially discriminatory practices in their own missions, African Christians turned to alternate models for advancement, particularly American Negroes like Washington and the industrial education model made famous by Washington's Tuskegee Institute. During the South African War between the British and Afrikaners, many Africans believed that the British, who had abolished slavery in 1838 to the chagrin of Afrikaner slaveholders and who reputedly believed in "equal rights for all civilized men," would allow them to be full citizens in a unified South African state. Yet British victory only meant the continued disenfranchisement of virtually all Africans; the creation of a unified "native policy" of segregation; and, with the Union of South Africa in 1910, British acquiescence to Afrikaner domestic political control that appropriated African lands and relegated Africans to being virtual aliens in their own country. More and more disillusioned with both the white missions of their upbringing and the British, two American-educated Africans, Pixley Seme and John Dube, founded and led the African National Congress (ANC). In its early years, this organization protested (among other unjust laws) the Natives Land Act of 1913, which restricted Africans, who made up 75 percent of the population, to only 6 percent of the total land. African petitions and deputations to Britain to

override South African domestic laws failed; by 1919, the ANC and other Africans concluded that the British were not liberators and indeed were deeply complicit in their imprisonment under the rule of the Afrikaner-controlled national government. Liberation would have to come from elsewhere.

Chapter 3 describes the political maturation of Marcus Garvey and his founding of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the African Communities (Imperial) League, which sought African independence from European colonialism; black politicoeconomic advancement; and black control of religious, educational, and cultural institutions. With more than three hundred thousand dues-paying members, a thousand chapters, and perhaps another million supporters around the world, the UNIA was not only the largest black-led movement in history but also one of the rare attempts by blacks to create a transnational state. Primarily because of South Africa's harsh racial conditions, the transmission of Garveyism to South African ports by American Negro sailors, and the dissemination of the UNIA newspaper *Negro World*, there were more UNIA chapters in South Africa than in any other African country. American Negroes in South Africa established local UNIA chapters, infusing them with a prophetic politics that spoke of divinely ordained deliverance from white rule, and the UNIA petitioned the League of Nations for control of South African–controlled Southwest Africa.

Chapter 4 addresses the spread and triumph of Garveyism in South Africa, particularly in non-UNIA organizations like the ANC and the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU)—despite Garvey's incarceration, his self-destructive battles with Du Bois and other black leaders in America, his peculiar links with white supremacist groups, the decline of the American UNIA, and anti-Garvey sentiment expressed by many Africans and some American Negroes in South Africa. Despite Garvey's troubles, Africans such as American-educated James Thaele continued to view American Negroes as models of success independent of white trusteeship. With his charismatic personality, his flamboyant leadership style, and his expert use of print media to advance Garveyism and advocate black separatist programs that often intersected with white segregationist programs, Thaele was the closest thing to Garvey himself in South Africa. He articulated the deep sense of disillusionment that blacks on both sides of the Atlantic felt when visions of post–World War I racial equality, justice, and self-determination failed to materialize. As a person with a theological degree, Thaele also represented African Christian tendencies to articulate a racially egalitarian Christianity that knew no color line and prophesied an imminent judgment day for ungodly racist whites.

Chapter 5 highlights the continued indigenization of Garvey's movement in Africa. Wellington Butelezi, a Zulu, was one of several Africans claiming to be American Negroes and part of an imminent liberationist invasion from

America. Building on past prophecies of deliverance from suffering that dated to the nineteenth century, Wellington expanded the view of American e-groes, portraying them not just as role models but also as liberators. Under Wellington, the UNIA became a vehicle to express popular discontent with white rule, to create and control black-led churches and schools, and to construct transnational racial identities connected to black American power rather than narrow ethnic identities subordinate to the South African state.

Chapter 6 details the ongoing decline in the stature of Garvey and the UNIA in the Northern Hemisphere as well as the continued ability of Africans to manipulate and shape Garveyism to address local politics and mobilize popular support for their chieftaincy claims. On the eve of World War II, there were final prophecies of American Negro liberation, but since Garvey and the Americans still did not come, a few Africans predicted liberation from an unlikely source that appeared to have the power to defeat both Britain and South Africa: Nazi Germany. Yet even as the dream of the American Negro liberator faded, students like Sibusisiwe Makhanya continued to view the United States as a promised land of highly valued education. After the death of Washington, South African students sought schooling in the liberal arts, the traditional education of the white elite, in contrast to the Booker T. Washington model of vocational/agricultural education that gave Africans less training for leadership in an eventually independent and modern Africa. Just before World War II broke out, the boxing victories of the second black world heavyweight champion, Joe Louis, and the cultural production of film and singing star Paul Robeson were inspirational success stories to Africans like American-educated ANC president Alfred Xuma. In the years ahead, Xuma's political ties with African American missionary Max Yergan and Robeson would inaugurate a new era of African–American Negro relationships that would unite their respective national struggles for racial equality in a global struggle for civil rights, human rights, and the end of apartheid.