Introduction

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They could hear a stream running down to the ravine where it met the other stream and then the river. . . . From there it met the Ohio and the Ohio met the Mississippi and then down to the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic, it was all connected.

Philip Meyer, American Rust

Individually and collectively, the essays in this volume showcase, but also interrogate, the value of Atlantic World frameworks for understanding the histories and cultures of the American South. Although the majority of the chapters are broadly historical in nature, several are from literary or cultural studies perspectives and others are avowedly interdisciplinary. They range temporally from colonial times to the modern era. Thematically, they embrace economics, migration, religion, revolution, law, slavery, race relations, emancipation, gender, literature, performance, visual culture, memoir, ethnography, empires, nations, and historiography. Geographically, they focus mainly on the southern region of the North American continent and the lands in and around the Atlantic Ocean—although the physical location of a putative “Atlantic World” and, for that matter, of something we can call an “American South” are among the many definitional issues with which the volume wrestles.

This is an opportune moment to think about the utility of Atlantic World models for scholars of the American South. The fields of Atlantic history and its interdisciplinary cousin Atlantic studies are now well established. Within southern historical, literary, and cultural studies there has been an enormous complementary interest in hemispheric or New
World approaches to the region alongside work dealing more specifically with the Black Atlantic.

These Atlantic-oriented analytical moves have intersected with, and sometimes come into conflict with, broader “transnational” and “post-national” turns in southern and American studies and a growing commitment to globalizing the study of region and nation. According to their advocates, both moves promise to rescue southern and American studies from the tyranny of nationally circumscribed narratives that bear the ordure of a discredited southern regional and U.S. national exceptionalism. This quest, in the words of Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer, to “unmoor the South from its national harbor” and embed it “in a larger transnational framework” has become commonplace among the loose conglomeration of southern literary and cultural studies scholars broadly associated, some more willingly and appropriately than others, with the New Southern Studies.1

Meanwhile, books like Grounded Globalism, anthropologist James Peacock’s sprawling examination of how southern regional identity might be recast in an age of heightened global economic, military, and cultural interconnectedness, the collection of essays on Globalization and the American South edited by historians James Cobb and William Stueck, diplomatic historian Joseph A. Fry’s survey of the “vast and often decisive impact” of the American South on U.S. foreign policy in Dixie Looks Abroad, sociologist Wanda Rushing’s investigation of globalization in Memphis, and the birth of proudly interdisciplinary journals such as Global South suggest that similar concerns are animating many southernists working in a variety of disciplines.2 It is in the context of these ever-expanding comparative, transnational, and global perspectives on the American South that this volume revisits the merits of narrower Atlantic World perspectives for those seeking to understand the region. At the same time, of course, many of the essays also remind us of the importance of the American South in shaping a series of overlapping and unstable Atlantic worlds. Indeed, the South’s status as simultaneously co-creator and product, beneficiary and benefactor of various Atlantic systems forms a powerful theme throughout the volume.

The collection opens with my own essay, which samples an eclectic range of literature, scholarly and creative, to examine the main conceptual and practical issues raised by Atlantic approaches to the American South. Using the memoirs of author-critic Caryl Phillips and the theoretical
modeling of historian David Armitage to frame the discussion, it considers the strengths, weaknesses, and potential of various Atlantic perspectives for southern studies and offers an intellectual context for the volume as a whole. While embracing the possibilities opened up by closer dialogue across traditional disciplinary divides, the essay also reaffirms the value of uni- and multi-, as well as inter-disciplinary work on the South’s Atlantic connections.

Given the enormous technical challenges posed by situating the American South within a comprehensive Atlantic World framework, I note that “granular” approaches to the mutually constitutive relationships between the South and the Atlantic World have been especially productive. This granularity is evident in studies that focus primarily on particular places, individuals, groups, moments, or themes in order to trace and evaluate the impact of much broader Atlantic forces as they flow into and out of the South. Many of the essays in the volume also adopt granular approaches of one sort or another, revealing the significance of the South’s Atlantic World connections by examining the lives of certain individuals, or the collective histories of particular groups and locales, or else by tracking Atlantic-South interactions at certain historical moments, or along distinct thematic lines.

Jon Sensbach, for example, focuses on the remarkably diverse, globally inflected religious life of the South in the colonial and the early republic periods to complicate our understandings of the region’s Atlantic heritage. Sensbach points out that transatlantic imports, not least African traditions and Anglo-Protestant evangelicalism, were important features of the southern religious landscape but hardly the only, nor necessarily always the most important ones. However, with the end of the transatlantic slave trade and the growing defensiveness and cultural isolation of the South in the antebellum period, the dynamic religious cosmopolitanism of the colonial era dwindled. According to Sensbach, it was only in the early to mid-nineteenth century that European-derived evangelical Christianity increasingly dominated the region, if never absolutely and never in anything resembling a “pure” form given the importance of African influences and adaptations. The belated triumph of a relatively narrowly Atlantic, and then of a still more narrowly construed “southern” style of evangelical Christianity, he charges, has generated a literature that largely ignores more than two centuries of dynamic religious experimentation and diversity.
In another mode of granular study, the essays by Natalie Zacek, Jennifer K. Snyder, Martha S. Jones, Leigh Anne Duck, Kathleen M. Gough, and Natanya Keisha Duncan all focus primarily on individuals or distinctive groups to illuminate the South’s complex relationships to various Atlantic worlds. Zacek considers the political and personal career of the murdered Virginia-born, British-sponsored Leeward Islands governor Daniel Parke to show how fatally difficult it could be to juggle the contradictory demands of yoked yet differentiated Atlantic worlds in the eighteenth century. Jennifer K. Snyder’s essay focuses on the story of James Moncrief, the Loyalist chief engineer for Georgia and South Carolina, and his slaves as they fled the South into the Caribbean in the wake of British defeat in the American Revolution. Highlighting the personal dilemmas faced by southern Loyalists and their slaves amid a transatlantic power struggle, Snyder demonstrates how mobility and settlement, in many ways the key tropes of Atlantic studies, were experienced differently in different locales by different peoples in the Atlantic World.

Martha S. Jones uses the story of Saint-Domingue slave Jean Baptiste to illustrate how competing legal regimes in the New World and even within the North American mainland profoundly affected the lives of those who lived there, free and unfree. Indeed, Jones’s deft analysis of Baptiste’s travails in Port-au-Prince, New York, Baltimore, and New Orleans in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution affirms the importance of rival legal codes, themselves connected to competing imperial and national jurisdictions, in defining the Atlantic World, particularly in matters pertaining to race and slavery.

In chronological terms, the essays by Sensbach, Zacek, Snyder, and Jones fall squarely within the period, roughly from 1500 to 1830, on which Atlantic historians have focused most intently. In his historiographical overview, Trevor Burnard argues that, for all its many achievements, Atlantic history’s early modern fixation has exacerbated an unhelpful division between American colonial historians, who have been increasingly committed to Atlantic perspectives, and colleagues working in the later nineteenth century and beyond, who use such paradigms relatively rarely. As Burnard suggests—and as Natanya Duncan’s essay with its twentieth-century focus illustrates—there is great potential in a more elastic temporal approach to the Atlantic World among southern, and other, historians. Certainly, colleagues in southern literary and cultural studies have been much bolder in exploring the region’s Atlantic coordinates and
relationships into the modern era, as the essays in this volume by Duck, Gough, and Keith Cartwright demonstrate.

Like fellow historian Trevor Burnard, Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie adopts a transnational perspective to challenge some of the most powerful paradigms operating within the historiography on the nineteenth-century American South. In critically reappraising the enormous literature on U.S. emancipation and Reconstruction, much of it comparative in orientation, Kerr-Ritchie exposes a surprisingly strong residual commitment to ideas of southern exceptionalism. In a productively provocative account, Kerr-Ritchie looks to the Atlantic and other worlds to reevaluate what, if anything, was really distinctive about the southern experiences of civil war, emancipation, and reconstruction.

Like many of the essays in this book, Leigh Anne Duck’s study of the Baltimore-born African Methodist Episcopal bishop Levi Jenkins Coppin is concerned with how ideas of race and racial, as well as regional, identity were generated and circulated in a transoceanic context. Under Duck’s scrutiny, the turn-of-the-twentieth-century writings and photographs of Coppin, a proud, self-declared “Southerner by birth” who became the first AME bishop of Cape Town in South Africa, demonstrate how conceptions of the Atlantic World and its constituent parts and peoples were at some level created by acts of imagination. Duck reveals the Atlantic World, like the American South, as in part a symbolic construct enacted through textual and visual representations and misrepresentations, as well as through the kinds of commercial, demographic, military, and legal encounters and exchanges that historians tend to privilege. Coppin’s fraught, sometimes contradictory and patronizing attempts to work through notions of diasporic black identities, while also critiquing different regimes of racial oppression on both sides of the Atlantic, complicates how we think about the Black Atlantic and its manifestations in Africa and the United States.

Kathleen M. Gough’s essay juxtaposes the careers of two remarkable female writers and ethnographers of the early twentieth century—Florida’s Zora Neale Hurston and Ireland’s Lady Augusta Gregory—to illuminate the creation of both Black and Green Atlantics. By exploring these women’s creative and folkloric work and their subsequent public reputations, Gough reveals how powerful notions of Irish and black—especially southern black—identity and related ideas of cultural authenticity were generated, disseminated, and redeployed around the Atlantic World, often with recourse to strikingly similar invocations of agrarianism, religiosity, and
resistance (cultural and political) to oppression. In the process, Gough also critiques a tendency to ignore or marginalize women in Atlantic studies—a tendency that Natanya Keisha Duncan’s essay on the Accra-born Princess Laura Kofey and her Garveyite political, economic, and cultural activities in the interwar South also reverses. Duncan emphasizes the special place that the American South occupied in Kofey’s plans for greater commercial and educational exchange between Africans and African Americans and, ultimately, for repatriation. By noting the regional, gender, class, and racial dimensions of Kofey’s transatlantic experiences, Duncan joins Snyder, Jones, Kerr-Ritchie, Duck, and Gough in adding nuance to our appreciation of how the Black Atlantic functioned.

In the final essay in the volume, Keith Cartwright reminds us that subjective judgments and personal knowledge of the Atlantic World, whether recorded in memoir, expressed in the creative arts, or, as with Cartwright’s own Peace Corps experiences in Senegal, channeled into a particular brand of scholarship, have been important elements in generating understandings of the South’s relationship to places around the Atlantic. In a bold, multi-layered, and temporally expansive interdisciplinary essay that circumnavigates the Atlantic World several times, Cartwright demonstrates how experiences, real and imagined, of the American South, of the Atlantic World, and of the connections between them have always varied according to precisely whose perspective is being examined, privileged, or obscured.

This volume reminds us that comparative and transnational approaches to the American South can illuminate both the similarities and the differences between various sites in the Atlantic World. Indeed, one strength of Atlantic perspectives on the South is that they can simultaneously, if somewhat paradoxically, challenge exceptionalist narratives about the region without gratuitously ignoring the truism that each locale within the Atlantic World, including the South and its subdivisions, is in some way distinctive, though never isolated from or immune to transnational currents. Attempts to unravel the complex relationships among, and the competing explanatory power of, various regional, national, hemispheric, Atlantic, and global contexts for understanding the American South animate many of the essays in the collection.

Ultimately, the value of any grand conceptual paradigm, such as Atlantic history, or Atlantic studies, or the Black Atlantic, rests on its capacity to explain past or present social realities; it is valuable insofar as it helps