

Statement of Intended Research:

Working title:

‘Southern Depictions of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century America’

Preferred supervisor:

██████████

Historiographical context:

Historians continue to debate the effect of slavery on the development of the Southern United States. Early thought championed by Eugene Genovese (1965) maintained that it was mired in a pre-modern past. While the North was governed by self-reliant industrialists, the South remained ruled by semi-feudal aristocrats.

This straightforward dichotomy has been problematised in recent scholarship. As Walter Johnson (2013) indicates, it seems too teleological and nationalist in its construction to be full historical truth. The Civil War becomes the story of America rightfully banishing its feudal past. The work of David Jansson (2003) and Susan Mary Grant (2000) has indicated that this narrative was constructed by the North. Holding the monopoly on print culture, they defined America’s national image. Depictions of the antiquated South served as a foil to Northern innovation, cementing their place in the modernising Western world.

Looking beyond Northern tropes, economic historians have evidenced that Northern and Southern development was closely tethered by a thread of cotton (Johnson, 2013; Beckert, 2014; Earnest, 2014). Fuelled by European investment and utilising modern technology, planters involved themselves in prevailing economic and technological revolutions. In total opposition to Genovese, scholars such as Sven Beckert have illuminated their role as “cotton capitalists” who helped “usher in the modern world” (2014, p. xii and xi).

My Aims:

While these studies are of vital importance, they nevertheless leave fundamental questions unresolved. As much of this work focuses exclusively on economic history, the Southern cultural reception of modernity remains largely unexplored. Scholarship in this field remains focused on the North, automatically excluding the South from analysis. As one instance, in his important work on Frederick Douglass, John Stauffer dismisses Southern engagement with modern visual technology in one sentence. This seems somewhat ironic considering he later admits Douglass’ picture was taken by several Southern photographers (Stauffer et al, 2015, pp. xi – xvi).

This maintains the historical and historiographic bias to portray the South as antithetical to nineteenth-century society. To understand modern America fully, we must understand how the concept of modernity emerged, and how the South contributed to the creation of this concept. If the North exaggerated elements of Southern traditionalism, we must question how Southerners conceptualised their place in an increasingly modern world, and investigate how this contributed to prevailing ideas.

Certainly, while the recent scholarship on the development of the South is crucial, it is based on current concepts of ‘modernity’. Economic historians like Beckert or Baptist demonstrate how Southerners worked within this formulation, exploiting technologies and economic systems the reader perceives as modern. Yet, while they might have helped ‘usher in’ modernity, they were not

active in conceptually defining it. This narrows 'modernity' into a static concept that the South did not help create. American modernity is allowed to be perceived as simply 'progressive', born of singular unproblematic origins. As Edward Baptist himself puts it, "if slavery was outside US history (...) then slavery was not implicated in US growth, success, power and wealth" (2014, p. xxi). If American 'growth' was founded on the slave South as much as the free North, then we also must engage with the complex and more insidious conceptual origins of American modernity.

To summarise, current scholarship leaves us with two unanswered questions. Firstly, how did Southerners view modernity and their place within it? Secondly, how did this contribute to the concept of 'modern America' more widely? These questions will frame my research.

Framework:

To examine this, my research will focus on popular visual and textual sources. Indeed, as the work of Vanessa Schulman (2015) indicates, Americans conceptualised modernity through various mediums.

Traditional studies of Southern cultural identity analyse works of fiction, perhaps most archetypally in William Robert Taylor's *Cavalier and Yankee* (1961). My thesis will reposition both this scholarship and its sources. If fiction, as Taylor hypothesises, invented the South, I will examine how modernity was constructed within this legend. I will also consider non-fiction works, most prominently newspapers. A large variety of these are available online, particularly through the Digital Library of Georgia. This will integrate a wider and more popular perception of modernity into my research.

Within this, I will explore how the author depicts technologies considered 'modern' to the nineteenth century. I will also examine what they specifically label as 'modern' or 'innovative'. This will show how Southern ideas of modernity align with (and diverge from) other contemporary impressions.

Concerning visual culture, I will focus on photographs, moving panoramas, and lithographs. This will interact with the emerging scholarship of Amy Defalco Lippert (2018), Peter John Brownlee (2018), and Martyn Hudson (2019), focusing on the connections between visuality and modernity. As well as analysing imagery in itself, I will consult photographic guides and possibly works regarding physiognomy or phrenology. Considering the use of racial science to validate slavery, this in itself indicates Southern interactions with more unsavoury elements of the modernising world.

I will also include the work of infamous Southerners, but I do not want to narrow my focus to a series of individuals. There is room for comparison, for instance, looking at wider reactions to *De Bow's Review* may indicate why his idea of 'modernity' ultimately failed to capture the South. I believe this will evidence differing Southern 'modernities' less than narrowing my focus to a singular idea cultivated by intellectuals.

Conclusion:

As one South Carolinian commented with awe of moving panoramas, "there always seems to be a new picture up (...) wink your eyes, another is presented"¹. His admiration indicates a more complex engagement with modernity than the historical narrative has suggested. Southerners created an intricate depiction of themselves as citizens of a burgeoning industrial-capitalist world, one that must not be excluded from consideration. We must recognise the slave South as an active force in the conceptual origins of American modernity.

¹ William Bobo, *Glimpses of New York City by a South Carolinian* (Charleston, 1852) p. 121

Bibliography:

- Baptist, Edward E. *The Half that Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014)
- Beckert, Sven. *Empire of cotton: a new history of Global Capitalism* (London, 2014)
- Bobo, William. *Glimpses of New York City by a South Carolinian* (Charleston, 1852) p. 121
- Brownlee, Peter John. *The Commerce of Vision: Optical Culture and Perception in Antebellum America* (Pennsylvania, 2019)
- Cobb, James. *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford, 2006)
- DeFalco Lippert, Amy. *Consuming Identities: Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Oxford, 2018)
- Genovese, Eugene. *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South* (New York, 1965)
- Grant, Susan Mary. *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Kansas, 2000)
- Hudson, Martyn. *Visualising the Empire of Capital* (New York, 2019)
- Jansson, David. 'Internal Orientalism in America: W.J. Cash's 'The Mind of the South' and the spatial construction of American national identity' *Political Geography* vol 22 (2003)
- Johnson, Walter. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, 2013)
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. 'The Right to Look', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2011)
- Schulman, Vanessa. *Work Sights: The Visual Culture of Industry in Nineteenth-Century America* (Massachusetts, 2015)
- Stauffner, John, Zoe Trodd, Celeste-Marie Bernier, Henry Lewis Gates, and Kenneth B. Morris. *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York, 2015)
- Taylor, William Robert. *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York, 1961)