



# *Safundi*

The Journal of South African  
and American Comparative Studies

ISSUE 21  
JANUARY 2006

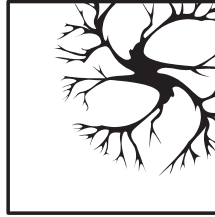
## The Comparative Imagination

---

GEORGE FREDRICKSON AND NEW DIRECTIONS  
IN COMPARATIVE AND TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY

Derek Catsam  
*University of Texas of the Permian Basin*

*www.safundi.com*



# The Comparative Imagination

GEORGE FREDRICKSON AND NEW DIRECTIONS IN  
COMPARATIVE AND TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY

Derek Catsam  
*University of Texas of the Permian Basin*

## INTRODUCTION

It seems appropriate, as *Safundi* reflects on the inestimable contributions of Professor George Fredrickson to the art of comparative history, to remember that the *New York Review of Books* reviewer of Fredrickson's seminal book, *White Supremacy*, was the late, great C. Vann Woodward. Although no American historian has ever been associated so closely with one geographic region, Woodward, who practically reinvented Southern history, long had an eye for analogy and comparison. In 1968 he published an edited collection, *The Comparative Approach to American History*, that, if not overlooked, at least managed to slip beneath the transom of most historians, despite the fact that the book's list of contributors was a virtual who's who of giants who stood astride the profession—John Higham, David Brion Davis, John Hope Franklin, Richard Hofstadter, William Leuchtenburg, and Ernest May are just a handful of Woodward's authors. The others do not pale in strength of reputation.<sup>1</sup>

Oxford University Press re-released *The Comparative Approach* to somewhat greater acclaim in 1997, reminding the profession that Woodward had long ago called upon American historians to look outward even when they work inward.<sup>2</sup> Woodward was thus a better choice than he might have at first appeared to be to assess *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* upon that book's 1981 publication.<sup>3</sup> Inevitably, for Fredrickson's accomplishment was manifest, Woodward's imprimatur followed. "George Fredrickson's *White Supremacy*," wrote Woodward in his

- 
1. C. Vann Woodward, *The Comparative Approach to American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).
  2. C. Vann Woodward, *The Comparative Approach to American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
  3. George M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

review, “is a major contribution to the art of historical comparison and it richly illustrates what can be done in the way of removing the blinders of the obvious and the parochial.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the emergent stars in the historiography of race in the United States had suddenly become launched as perhaps America’s premier comparative historian. Certainly in the quarter century that followed, Fredrickson became most well known for his comparative work. After what seemed like an interminable delay for his devotees, Fredrickson released the sequel to *White Supremacy, Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black ideologies in the United States and South Africa*, in 1995.<sup>5</sup> Two years later the University of California Press issued a collection of Fredrickson’s penetrating essays, aptly titled *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements*.<sup>6</sup> Most recently, in 2003 Fredrickson published *Racism: A Short History*, in which he utilized his comparative framework to synthesize the biggest of ideas into the briefest of books.<sup>7</sup> For the last quarter century, Fredrickson has assessed works on American and South African history in the *New York Review of Books* and elsewhere. As a scholar and a public intellectual, then, Fredrickson’s output has been unmatched in quality and depth. It would be an injustice to other comparativists to assert that Fredrickson is the father of comparative history, but he certainly stands astride the field like a colossus.

Fredrickson looms so large, in fact, that non-specialists can be forgiven for forgetting that *White Supremacy*, which seems to stand alone now, actually had some formidable competition in John W. Cell’s *Highest Stage of White Supremacy*, an equally ambitious treatment of, as Cell’s subtitle explicates, “the origins of segregation in South Africa and the American South” and, to a somewhat lesser degree, Stanley Greenberg’s *Race and State in Capitalist Development: Comparative Perspectives*.<sup>8</sup> Both are fine works, but neither author sustained his inquiries as Fredrickson did in the years and decades to come.

Fredrickson thus was an essential figure in not only the emerging comparative scholarship that would emerge in the wake of *White Supremacy*, he also has cast a significant shadow on some of the most vibrant trends in recent scholarship, including transnational studies and even a particular strand of works on diplomatic and international history. The remainder of this essay will investigate (admittedly only partially and suggestively, and not comprehensively and exhaustively) some of these trends.

---

4. Woodward, “Herrenvolk Democracy,” *New York Review of Books*, March 5, 1981, 28.

5. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

6. Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

7. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

8. John W. Cell, *The Highest State of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and Stanley Greenberg, *Race and State in Capitalist Development: Comparative Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

## COMPARATIVE HISTORY

Fredrickson is most closely linked to that work that is explicitly comparative, and in which the nodes of comparison are the United States and South Africa. Fredrickson has endorsed comparison on a grand scale, emphasizing broad geographic terrain, extended time periods, and ambitious phenomena (white supremacy, black liberation, racism—no micro-histories in that lot). There are two especially noteworthy recent trends that have emerged in the comparative historiography involving the United States and South Africa. One buttresses Fredrickson's grand approach, the other goes in the other direction. Fredrickson's imprint nonetheless looms large with both approaches.

The first of these trends has involved branching beyond the United States-South Africa axis to include a third node of comparison. Potentially unwieldy, there have nonetheless been some signs that this is a fruitful, if daunting, approach. In 1992 Donald Harmon Akenson published *God's Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster* (a book, incidentally, reviewed by John Cell in the *American Historical Review*). Although it does not involve the United States, Akenson's ambitious work reveals one of the possibilities for multi-nation comparisons that Americanists and South Africanists are beginning to take seriously—expanding the nodes of comparison but limiting the thematic acreage. Akenson emphasizes the role of covenant theology, the belief of a people that their tie to a land and thus their dominance over it is ordained by a higher power. Akenson tends to focus on each case individually rather than embrace the sort of full-fledged comparison that Fredrickson has endorsed, and some of his conclusions are problematic (he veers toward a somewhat exceptionalist view of his three societies) but *God's People* nonetheless kicked off a process that would reach further fruition in scholarship as the last century came to its conclusion.<sup>9</sup>

Anthony W. Marx's 1998 book, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa and Brazil*, marks, for the time being, the apogee of such multinational studies. Unlike Akenson, Marx covers almost as ambitious thematic territory as Fredrickson has tackled by linking the creation of nations with the simultaneous construction of racial identity so that the two are inextricably bound even as they manifested themselves somewhat differently in the three cases. Marx reveals the particular benefits to adding a third area of analysis in his use of Brazil, for as he ably shows, Brazil lacked the sort of black political mobilization and thus explicitly racist response among whites that emerged in the United States and South Africa, and as a consequence national identity emerged in some ways more easily in Brazil, where elites effectively skirted the race question that scarred elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

---

9. Donald Herman Akenson, *God's Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); John W. Cell, Review in the *American Historical Review* 98, no. 5 (December 1993), 1567-68.

10. Anthony W. Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa and Brazil* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Incidentally, Yale University's Courtney Young assesses *Making Race and Nation*, *The Comparative Imagination*, and Ran Greenstein's important edited collection, *Comparative Perspectives on South Africa*, in a review essay in *African Studies Review* 42, no. 3 (December 1999), 56-62.

Brazil represented the third node of comparison as well for a collection for which Fredrickson provided the lead essay, *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa and the United States*. Uneven in quality and approach, *Beyond Racism* is nonetheless indicative of future directions in comparative studies.<sup>11</sup> Collaborations such as edited collections will always be a useful way to approach comparative studies because of the difficulties and limitations inherent in comparative work. It will always be more manageable, even if the end-result is not more satisfying, for several contributors to wrestle with an aspect of a problem than for one ambitious scholar to do so.

Comparative works of the other sort, perhaps best termed as micro-comparisons, have not hit full stride and yet would seem to reveal the capacity for richness and depth that the more broadly focused studies of necessity must sacrifice. At the risk of naval gazing, *Safundi* points the way toward new directions in comparative historiography.<sup>12</sup> Whether in the forms of monographs yet to emerge or essays in *Safundi* (including its two published books) and elsewhere, the hope remains that studies centered around specific themes will emerge to fill in gaps of our comparative understanding. The best book-length study to date is James Campbell's *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, a sensitive and meticulously researched work that has increased our understanding of religious development and identity in the United States and South Africa.<sup>13</sup> Campbell's book is a work of comparative history that also fits into the next category under discussion—transnational history—where some of the most vibrant work in contemporary scholarship is emerging.

## TRANSNATIONAL STUDIES

While Fredrickson is most closely associated with comparison (and contrast) in its most explicit sense, in recent years there has been an explosion of work not explicitly comparative, but that explores the interactions between peoples and institutions

- 
11. Charles V. Hamilton et. al., *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa and the United States* (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001). One other edited collection worth noting in this context is Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern, *Racializing Class Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000). This book both expands the frame of reference for comparison by focusing on Britain, the United States, and the whole of Africa while at the same time limiting focus to questions related to race and labor. Interested readers can see my May 2001 H-SAfrica review of this book, available at <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=31222988823518>.
  12. See Andrew Offenburger and Christopher Saunders, eds., *A South African and American Comparative Reader: The Best of Safundi and Other Selected Articles* (Safundi, 2003) and Offenburger, Saunders, and Christopher Lee, eds., *South Africa and the United States Compared: The Best of Safundi, 2003-2004* (Safundi: 2005). Along these lines, in 1996 the University of London's School of Advanced Study, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, held a conference, "Beyond White Supremacy: Towards a New Agenda for the Comparative Histories of South Africa and the United States" for which Fredrickson was the keynote speaker. The collection was gathered in the Institute's "Collected seminar papers #49."
  13. James Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Campbell contributed to the ICS conference discussed in footnote 12, above.

in the United States and South Africa, or between Americans and Africans. Furthermore, although one needs not look far to find lamentations about the decrepit state of diplomatic history, which in many university history departments has fallen out of favor, there is one noteworthy exception to this apparent trend: studies of American relations with Africa appear to be alive and well.

Americans and South Africans have long been fascinated with one another and have found points of comparison and contrast. In some ways, the written legacies of these sojourners mark early examples of transnational scholarship, for even when the goal is comparative reflection, the project is the result of the sorts of interaction on the ground that transnational scholars have come to excel at producing. Maurice Evans, a white South African, was one of the first South Africans to leave such a record, and his book, *Black and White in the Southern States: A Study of the Race Problem in the United States from a South African Point of View* was recently re-issued in the Southern Classics Series of the University of South Carolina Press with the ubiquitous Fredrickson providing an introduction.<sup>14</sup> Based on his 1914 travels to the South, Evans, one of the English-born South Africans who was present at the birth of the Union of South Africa in 1910, brings together his observations about the American racial situation and draws the conclusion that America was not the place to look to settle South Africa's racial issues, for in the South, blacks and whites lived amongst one another out of necessity. Evans would conclude from this that strict racial separation was South Africa's only hope.

Of equal historical significance, but without a comparable agenda, is the record that the famed American civil rights activist and 1950 Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche left after his three month trip to South Africa from September 1937 to January 1938. Howard University professor Robert Edgar compiled and annotated Bunche's notes and Ohio University Press released them in a 1992 volume, *An American in South Africa: The Travel Notes of Ralph J. Bunche 28 September 1937-1 January 1938*.<sup>15</sup>

Far from being an anomaly, Bunche's marvelous, insightful account can be seen as simply an early example of American black interest in South Africa's racial problems. One of the most exciting trends in transnational historiography is the explosion in the last decade or so of studies investigating Americans addressing not only South African but African affairs generally. Not necessarily the stuff of traditional diplomatic history these studies investigate the role that African Americans and their white supporters played in drawing attention to not only America's racial problems but also to those of South Africa, and to pushing an aggressive approach toward combating apartheid.

Perhaps the most prominent and well-regarded early example of such a study is Lewis Baldwin's groundbreaking *Toward the Beloved Community: Martin Luther King, Jr. and South Africa*, which examined American responses to the South African struggle through the most visible civil rights leader.<sup>16</sup> Baldwin showed how King was at the

---

14. Maurice S. Evans, *Black and White in the Southern States: A Study of the Race Problem in the United States from a South African Point of View* with a new introduction by George Fredrickson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

15. Robert Edgar, ed., *An American in South Africa: The Travel Notes of Ralph J. Bunche 28 September 1937-1 January 1938* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992).

16. Lewis Baldwin, *Toward the Beloved Community: Martin Luther King, Jr. and South Africa* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995). *Safundi* readers may recall a memorable recent exchange that Professor Baldwin

forefront of an American engagement with South Africa's onerous racial system that would continue to grow to the point of directly affecting American policy in the 1980s.

In a small and sadly overlooked book published in 1999, political scientist Donald Culverson explored American anti-apartheid activism in *Contesting Apartheid: U.S. Activism, 1960-1987*.<sup>17</sup> The topic has received its fullest treatment to date in Francis Njubi Nesbitt's wonderful book *Race for Sanctions: African Americans Against Apartheid, 1946-1994*.<sup>18</sup> Both Culverson and Nesbitt recognize the salience that the anti-apartheid struggle held for many Americans, especially blacks dealing with their own issues of racial oppression, and reveal the cross-national implications of their struggle, as well as the difficulties they faced within the United States in mounting a struggle that crossed national boundaries during the Cold War years.

Black Americans did not limit their gaze to South Africa. American policy toward Africa and the anti-colonial struggle drew the attention of many Americans, and part of this growing transnational trend has been the emergence of a first-rate body of work. The best examples are Brenda Gayle Plummer's *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960*, Penny von Eschen's *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957*, James Meriwether's *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*, and Plummer's edited collection, *Windows on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights and Foreign Affairs 1945-1988*.<sup>19</sup>

Though somewhat less transnational in nature, there is also a growing literature on the role the Cold War played in shaping (and stunting) black aspirations during the Civil Rights Movement. One of the predominant themes of the transnational literature is the way in which politicians manipulated Cold War fears to frustrate the desires of citizens striving for better treatment and equal rights. American civil rights activists, even when they were not agitating for sanctions against apartheid or to push America to recognize African liberation struggles, operated within this environment as well. The best of these works include Mary Dudziak's *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Thomas Borstelmann's *Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*, George Lewis' *White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists, Anticommunists, and Massive Resistance*, and Jeff Woods' *Black Struggle, Red*

---

and I had in the pages of *Safundi* (Issues 15, 17, & 18) in which I maintained that Baldwin had overreached in trying to link King's legacy beyond parameters that I felt the historical record could support. Nonetheless, Baldwin's book is an essential contribution to what has become, in no small part thanks to his work, one of the most exciting subfields in the historical profession.

17. Donald Culverson, *Contesting Apartheid: U.S. Activism, 1960-1987* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).
18. Francis Njubi Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans Against Apartheid, 1946-1994* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). My review of *Race for Sanctions* appeared in *History: Reviews of New Books* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2005).
19. Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Penny von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); James Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Plummer, ed., *Windows on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights and Foreign Affairs 1945-1988* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). It should be noted that Culverson contributes an essay to Plummer's collection. It also is worth recognizing that the University of North Carolina Press has been at the forefront of this sort of transnational scholarship.

*Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968*.<sup>20</sup> Generally, Dudziak's and Borstelmann's books are more concerned with the ways in which race and the Cold War shaped American race relations at home and foreign policy abroad, and Woods and Lewis emphasize the *pas de deux* between the Civil Rights Movement and advocates of massive white resistance. All four books are important contributions. At first glance they may not seem to fit into a discussion on comparative and transnational history, but they do inasmuch as international relations and diplomatic history can benefit from an infusion of transnational and comparative perspectives. Much of the transnational literature of the last few years has operated under the understanding that the international context within which actors moved was vital to what they could accomplish. The aforementioned titles are part and parcel of the sorts of trends that *Safundi* long ago recognized as part of a vibrant new trend in comparative and transnational studies.

## TOWARD THE FUTURE: AVENUES FOR EXPLORATION

Comparison at the micro and the macro levels, transnationalism, and a reinvigorated view of Africa's international role: these seem to be the directions in which future scholarship are headed. Tracing the origins of any phenomenon is tricky work. This is especially true when it comes to comparative historiography, which has many parents and which requires at minimum a familiarity with and in the best scenarios a mastery of multiple literatures that too often have not spoken to one another. Indeed, some of these trends may be ones for which Fredrickson himself would disavow paternity, whether out of a sense of modesty or dubiety about what he might have wrought. But in ways that are significant, those of us who embrace the transnational and comparative endeavor(s) see Fredrickson as a father to us all.

It is common in acknowledgments of books for the author to thank those who have offered help and guidance while at the same time claiming all responsibility for errors of fact or interpretation that follow. Perhaps that, in the end, is what so many of us owe George Fredrickson: thanks for his guiding hand and the work that has paved the way, while at the same time we must allow the world to know that responsibility for how we may have sometimes deviated from his vision is ours alone.

---

20. Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); George Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists, Anticommunists, and Massive Resistance* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), and Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004). For the sake of full disclosure, I attended graduate school with Jeff Woods, we are co-editors on a book project, and I consider him a friend, as I do George Lewis. I do not, however, think that has prejudiced me into my conviction that these are both good and important books.