



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs Notice of Funding Opportunity at the appropriate resource page ([Awards for Faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions](#), [Awards for Faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#), [Awards for Faculty at Tribal Colleges and Universities](#)) for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

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Project Title: The End of Exceptionalism: African Americans Theorizing Race and Imperialism in South Africa and Beyond

Institution: Howard University

Project Director: Krista Johnson

Grant Program: Awards for Faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

The End of Exceptionalism: African Americans Theorizing Race and Imperialism in South Africa and Beyond

Krista Johnson, Howard University

Narrative

Four decades apart, two African American professors based at Howard University traveled to segregated South Africa to conduct research on racism and Empire. Ralph Bunche, probably the best-known African American to have visited and recorded his experiences in South Africa, traveled there in 1937, early on in his career, for a three-month visit to hone his skills in the field methods of cultural anthropologists. Merze Tate traveled to South Africa during the summer of 1976, her last research trip to Africa in the twilight of her career, to conduct fieldwork for her scholarly project on Mineral Railways in Africa.

Both Bunche and Tate recognized that apartheid and the system of racial segregation in South Africa was profoundly interconnected with the politics of the rest of the world in fundamental ways that have largely been overlooked by South Africanist scholars and scholars of International Relations. South Africa offered an important research site in which to examine the imperial origins of racial policies and the mechanics of empire building. Bunche and Tate, along with a cohort of Howard scholars that included Alain Locke, Rayford Logan, Eric Williams, and E. Franklin Frazier, were concerned with theorizing the role of race and empire in the international system. For them, hierarchy, not anarchy, was the hallmark of the international system.

I am seeking NEH support for eight months full-time, to conduct research in archives and research repositories in South Africa and the United States. My aim is to produce a book manuscript on South Africa's racialized history, as observed and theorized by these two African American scholars. The book project aims to uncover, historicize and contextualize Bunche and Tate's theoretical thinking on the international system, and how their South Africa research was both informed by and informed their broader intellectual framework. I will explore the concept of transnational white supremacy, or a 'global color line', and theories of race in the international system to reframe South African and International Studies in transnational, not comparative contexts. I also aim to (re)introduce the work of Bunche and Tate to the field of South African and African Studies by situating their research among a recent body of literature that argues against the exceptionalism of South Africa's institutions and politics.

Research and Contribution

Ralph Bunche and Merze Tate were trained in the discipline of international relations at Harvard University. In 1934, Bunche became the first African American to earn a doctorate in political science and government. Tate too received her doctorate in government from Harvard in 1941, becoming the first African American woman to receive a Ph.D. in the field. Their time at Howard University only overlapped by a couple of years. But both scholars were highly influenced by the vibrant intellectual community at Howard, and the extraordinary group of black scholars the first black president of the university, Mordecai Johnson, was able to assemble, taking advantage of the highly segregated American academy at the time.

I hope this book project will be seen as groundbreaking in the recent renaissance of scholarship on the contributions of black American scholars to theorizing race both domestically and transnationally. Aldon Morris recent work on DuBois and the Atlanta School (Morris 2015), as well as Charles Henry and Robert Vitalis' work on the Howard School (Henry 1999; Vitalis 2015) aim to name, reclaim and reposition the pioneering contributions of black scholars in the American social science disciplines of Sociology and International Relations. The "Howard School" refers to Howard University-based African Diaspora scholars in the 1930s through 1950s, including Ralph Bunche and Merze Tate. These scholars represent an African American internationalist tradition, and, at the time, the only sustained critique of the hierarchy of the international system and the role that race played in buttressing it. These scholars problematized race in the discussion of international affairs and repeatedly referenced imperialism in their

work. Yet, just as the hidden history of race in the early years of the discipline of IR has been forgotten, so too has the critique that emerged from the Historically Black Academy. Robert Vitalis' book, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations*, offers an excellent overview of this history of the discipline of international relations (IR), and highlights these counterarguments advanced by African American scholars at Howard University about the meaning of race and the legitimacy of empire. He has laid the groundwork for other scholars to provide empirical research on the content of the Howard School's critique.

My research will contribute to building this empirical database, as well as to the analytical work of contextualizing their research within particular moments of international turmoil and flux, and critical junctures for black political movements in South Africa. Bunche's visit to South Africa, for example, coincided with the passage of a series of segregation bills by the Hertzog administration, that most notably set a ceiling on the amount of land that Africans could eventually occupy, and eliminated the Cape African vote from the only enfranchised group of Africans in the country. Tate's visit came on the heels of the June 16, 1976 Soweto Student Uprisings, another transformative moment in the anti-apartheid struggle that drew the attention of the international community and mobilized a new generation of freedom fighters. But both scholars were cosmopolitan in their thinking, and keenly aware of the need to theorize race and empire on a global level. Bunche's major effort in this regard was his monograph *A World View of Race*, published in 1936, which drew on his dissertation and applied his class analysis of the United States on a global scale. One of Tate's earlier and most direct attacks on imperialism can be found in her 1943 article, "The War Aims of World War II and Their Relation to the Darker Peoples of the World", published in a special issue of the *Journal of Negro Education*.

This project also builds on the work of my colleague Robert Edgar who in 1992 compiled an edited volume of Ralph Bunche's travel notes in South Africa. (Edgar 1992) As Bunche never managed to publish his research on South Africa, Edgar's volume brought his research findings and unique perspective on segregated South Africa to the public realm. It also relates to the current work of Pearl Robinson who is writing an intellectual biography of Ralph Bunche, the Africanist. Similar to Bunche, Tate's research on South Africa, and in fact a nearly complete manuscript on Mineral Railways in Africa, never made it to publication. An aim of this project is to make the research and writing of Tate, a relatively unknown and understudied African American pioneer, accessible in the public realm. Historian, Barbara Savage is currently writing a biography of Merze Tate, which will bring to light some of her unknown work across numerous continents. As a political scientist, my project is more narrowly focused on Tate's scholarship on colonialism in Africa, and the technologies of Empire.

My research will also make a significant contribution to the growing body of literature that downplays the exceptional status of South African political history, most prominently highlighted in the work of Mahmood Mamdani (1996). This critique has generally attempted to show how the South African experience is more similar to other African countries than not, and serves as a rebuke to the African National Congress' widely used term 'colonialism of a special type'. Early critiques of South Africa's unique character focused on the system of racial capitalism, and offered comparative analyses of the migrant labor system (Wolpe 1972). It also complements the work of Robert Vinson (2012) whose work moves beyond a comparative history of American Jim Crowism and South African racial segregation in the early 20th Century. Vinson's story is one of transnational white supremacy, and linkages between Africans and black Americans as they attempt to respond to it. Similarly, my research will utilize Bunche and Tate's work on South Africa to offer an internationalist revision of the rise and fall of apartheid, one that aims to up the significance of various international forces, institutions and players. By reading Bunche and Tate's research on South Africa through the IR lens of the 'Howard School', what becomes apparent is how interconnected South Africa's system of racial segregation was with the politics of the rest of the world, beyond the unpopularity of its racial policies within the United Nations, or the activism of the global anti-apartheid movement.

Methods and Work Plan

About forty percent of the research has already been conducted for this project. I have already consulted and reviewed the majority of the boxes in the Merze Tate collection at Howard University, which include her travel notes, diaries, videotaped footage, photographs, research reports, syllabi and class notes. I plan to spend the first four months of the Spring/Summer 2019 semester finishing my research in the Moorland Spingarn Center at Howard, including consulting the travel notes of Ralph Bunche deposited by Robert Edgar, and the collections of other notable Howard scholars, including Alain Locke, Eric Williams, and Rayford Logan, who had numerous linkages with South Africans. In the first four months, I also plan to travel to the Radcliffe's Schlesinger Library, Oral History Division in Boston where there is an unedited transcript of Tate's interview for the Black Women's Oral History Project. In the interview she recounts her research trip to South Africa. I will also visit the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) where much of Bunche's papers are housed, including film footage of his trip to South Africa.

I will travel to South Africa for four months in the Summer/Fall of 2019, and will be based at the University of Johannesburg, to conduct historical and archival research, including research in the National Archives in Pretoria and Cape Town, and interviews with key historians and experts.

Competencies, Skills and Access

This project builds on my interest in the contributions of African American scholars to the field of African Studies, as well as my longstanding work on South African politics. As a professor at Howard University for the past nine years, I have an intimate familiarity with the materials in the Moorland-Spingarn Collection. For the past three years, I have been conducting research using the collection. I have already convened a workshop, in conjunction with the American Political Science Association, on the Howard School, as well as completed several conference presentations and an upcoming journal publication. As a South Africa specialist for over two decades, and having lived in South Africa for about five years, I also bring significant breadth and depth of understanding and experience to interpreting and presenting the works of Bunche and Tate on South Africa.

Final Product and Dissemination

The final product for this research will be a scholarly book manuscript that will target two broad audiences – political science scholars in the sub-field of International Relations, and a broad selection of Africanist and Diaspora scholars. Chapter One will chart South African historiography beyond its parochial borders. 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 continued to afflict many West Indians. Chapter Two will detail the white racist sentiments and black peril paranoia in the international system, exemplified by internationally respected statesmen such as South Africa's Jan Smuts, who helped to found both the League of Nations and the United Nations. It will also highlight the response it drew, in particular from a group of Howard scholars, with strong international connections to liberation movements and anti-racist groupings. Chapter Three will focus on the Segregationist era in South Africa, and the critical period of the passage of a series of segregation bills by the Hertzog administration, as viewed through the lens of Ralph Bunche's travel notes. Chapter Four will analyze another transformative moment in South African history in the mid-1970s, through the research and writings of Merze Tate. Chapter Five will make the case for the Howard School of IR Theory, and Chapter Six will debunk the notion of South African exceptionalism, reframing South African history in transnational context.

This work will be disseminated through a variety of conference presentations, at the African Studies Association, the International Studies Association, and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) General Assembly, a large gathering of continental Africanists.

Krista Johnson
NEH Faculty Award – Bibliography

Selected Primary Sources

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