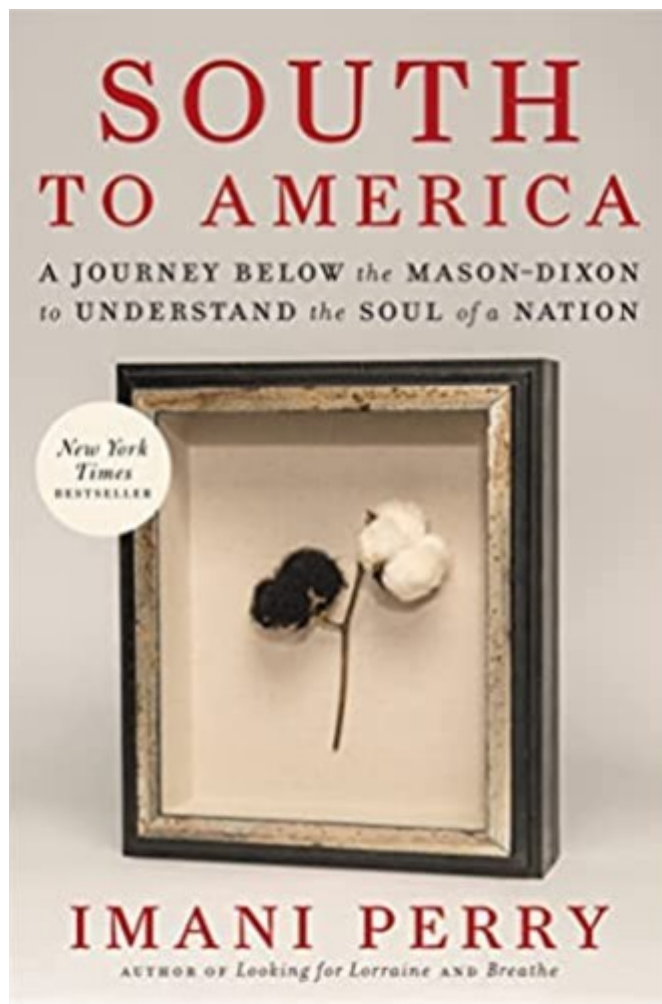


Imani Perry's tour of the American South

***South to America* shows how one region's beauty, losses, and inequities have shaped the country as a whole.**

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [August 10, 2022](#) issue

In Review



South to America

A Journey below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation

By Imani Perry

Ecco

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Imagine taking a bus tour of approximately one-third of the United States with a guide who not only knows the history of everything she is showing you but has absorbed her material with such passion that the tour has become a testimonial. *South to America* is no ordinary travel book, and Imani Perry, a writer perhaps best known for her biography of playwright Lorraine Hansberry, *Looking for Lorraine*, is no ordinary tour guide.

Each chapter shows the unique character of a region or city in the American South, with a final chapter on the Bahamas and Havana, Cuba, completing the journey. Perry begins in Appalachia and shuttles down to Maryland, DC, Virginia, and Louisville—all Upper South enclaves. Then she moves through Alabama (her home state), Mississippi, Tobacco Road, the Sea Islands, Savannah, Charleston, Atlanta, Memphis's Beale Street, and the peculiar American crescent known as the Black Belt. From there it's on to the low countries of Florida, Mobile, and New Orleans.

The chapters explore the distinctive qualities of each place, but together they stand for something larger and more original than themselves. They are the South. As the journey proceeds, Perry reveals the South's formative role in shaping the essence, or soul, of all that America has become. She grieves the thefts that can never be returned: neighborhood schools short on books and computers, endowment-starved historically Black colleges and universities, traditional communities either gentrified and yuppified or cut in two by freeways, professions largely closed to Black people, land promised but never given. The fabric of the South has been torn and bled out, yet it survives as a witness to something more than survival. At our nation's crossroads, struggling as we are with new forms of old hate, the South signifies a way forward for us all.

Beyond its historical and geographical markers, the American South is also an intuition. We can't define it, but we know it when we see it. Occasionally, Perry asks the people she interviews, What does this place feel like to you? To one person DC feels like the South, to another it does not. Virginia Beach, located at the southern tip of a southern state, has never felt like the South to me, while the river town of

Cairo, Illinois, located in a midwestern, historically free state, definitely does. To Perry, Princeton feels like the South, probably because she teaches at a gorgeous university with echoes of the plantation still about it. Her purpose, however, is not to define the attributes of southern sensibility but to connect with the stories and feelings of others, and always to share her own.

This book is a kind of Wikipedia of the South. Who knew about postwar Nazism in Jim Crow Alabama? Or Florida's "cracker architecture," or the surveying team of Mr. Mason and Mr. Dixon, or the sweet dress Carlotta Walls wore on the day she helped integrate Central High School in Little Rock? This information can be summarized, but what makes the book sing is Perry's voice. It is open, sharp, generous, and endlessly inquisitive.

It is also deeply interactive. In the chapter on Savannah, for example, Perry meets and is befriended by Walter Evans, a surgeon and collector of African American art and artifacts, and his wife, Linda, who is from "Alabama North" (aka Detroit). She feels at home in their Low Country house with its high ceilings and big windows. It is nestled in live oak and Spanish moss, which takes her back to an earlier visit as a teen when she was first enthralled by the city's "mythical" moss. Everything in the chapter radiates from this house. At dinner, her host leads a discussion of his childhood home of Beaufort, South Carolina, "the most beautiful city in the United States," and explains how it happened that a young Howard University graduate became both an authority on art and a surgeon. The ever-present spirits of W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black power preacher Albert Cleage hover over the conversation.

Later, a walk through the squares takes her past the childhood home of Flannery O'Connor, whose private disparagement of Black people disqualifies her as a "local saint." Perry imagines O'Connor in a conversation with another Savannah resident, the Black trans icon Lady Chablis. (Their meeting does not go well.) After walking to First African Baptist Church, the oldest Black church in North America, Perry embarks upon a conversation with two Black women who are Jehovah's Witnesses. The depths of Savannah contrast with Perry's earlier assessment of "Hotlanta" with its superficial shine. ("Atlanta makes it obvious that being American is being a trickster.") This little summary of one chapter only hints at the rich mixture of history and humanity that spills off the pages of this book.

Everywhere Perry grieves Black enslavement, exclusion, and deprivation—and everywhere she finds something to celebrate. In Memphis, she remarks on the

gentrifying of the city's Black identity, though its music remains. She adds:

Just remember, the sounds of this nation that captured the whole world were born out of repression. Up from the gutbucket, as it were. You know the song, maybe even the story, but I want you to study its provenance. Because it belongs to you, too. And so you are implicated; we all are. But will you serve as a witness?

Remarking on Elvis Presley's indebtedness to Black music, she names one of his counterparts. Did Elvis steal Little Richard's thunder? I don't know myself, but Perry argues Richard Penniman's case in a way that makes it a symbol of the greater theft of Black culture by White dominance.

She knows rock 'n' roll, jazz, gospel, bebop, rap, and hip-hop, but she saves her best eloquence for the music that cannot be stolen: the blues. Driving the Mississippi Blues Trail, she muses on the difference between the Parchman Farm blues (born of despair in the most notorious penitentiary in the history of the South) and the plantation songs that echo a different despair but help the work go by. The blues are songs of the interior, born of common memories, hurts, and hopes that can never be realized. She remarks, "A good time doesn't require abandonment of the hard time that settles inside your chest. Forever. This is what I think the blues are." They are shut away from the American dream, but they dream anyway.

Perry doesn't wonder why Black folks left the South; she asks why they stayed. Her answer is "home." If everyone had left, who would have remained to tend the ancestors' graves? This reminds me of the poignant scene in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* when young Harriet Jacobs goes to her parents' graves to ask their permission before running away. Perry venerates all who, like her, have taken the road away from the South and brought it with them. But she honors just as deeply those who have stayed.

I expected religion to play a more visible part in *South to America*. Martin Luther King Jr. seemed determined to shape the civil rights movement in the mirror of the Bible, whose characters and message he brilliantly illumined in his South. His ministry conjured deliverance as a decisive act, a win. Perry's stories tend to slow it down. She lifts up many crucifixions—the hidden ones—as well as evidence of victories in progress. The phrase "Understand the Soul of a Nation" in Perry's subtitle is a subtle play on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's motto,

“Redeeming the Soul of America.”

Still, Perry understands with King what befell the biblical God in the South: how that God was captured and defrauded of his own justice and dearest people. In fact, she sees two gods, the one of the masters and the one of the enslaved. She asks, as King did when he observed the lovely steeples and manicured lawns of Birmingham’s White churches, “Who is their God?”

She sees White dominion for what it was and is: a grotesque article of faith. It is a doctrine of cleanliness that its adherents will defend by means of the filthiest of tactics. She counters:

The God I was taught to believe in, a God rendered by the enslaved, was and remains at odds with that God. The God we’d been taught was the God of Exodus, the one who thundered “Let my people go.” Our God saw Caesar’s way was wrong, not because of who was on top and who was on the bottom, but because of the addiction to the idea of top and bottom, and the sin of working people to death, and the crises of vice and viciousness.

So many have been crushed by the God of the masters. Perry is open to the grace of God, but she also honors the spiritualities of those for whom grace has taken a different turn, in artistic achievement and even conjure and hoodoo. She writes, “As much as we want articles of faith to tell our stories, the most important thing is to be honest that they don’t tell them all.”

In her chapter on the Black Belt, the region in which people were the poorest and their chances of being lynched the greatest, Perry ventures a heartfelt, if familiar, challenge to the moral imagination. “We must become different kinds of people in relation to one another . . . people suited to the society we want to create.” One thinks of a similar comment by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*, following his own journey into the deep South: “We, the black and white, deeply need each other . . . if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity as men and women.”

South to America is not a book about religion, but it is a religious book. It is a book of finding. One of its findings is the racism that lies so near the heart of America—and not merely in the culture of the South, but in the sacred documents and original

polity of the nation. Perry's comments on Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*—in which he goes to some lengths to demean the intelligence of the people he owns—remind us that White supremacy is not an accident of our history or a recent aberration.

As Perry insists, we should not pretend that White supremacy is “merely a part of the nation's genealogy, but not its soul.” The enormity of its stain confronts each succeeding generation. Paradoxically, that very sin also magnifies the ongoing achievements of beauty, courage, and hope among African Americans of all generations. Depending on one's notion of how salvation happens in history—and in our particular history—*South to America* honors the complexities of getting saved in America.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A way forward from the South.”