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Cardon, Nathan

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Cycling on the Color Line: Race, Technology, and Bicycle Mobilities in the Early Jim Crow South, 1887-1905

ABSTRACT

The safety bicycle arrived in the U.S. South at the beginning of a transition from relative African American freedom following the Civil War to a reassertion of white hegemony in the region.

This article examines how white and African American southerners interpreted the meanings and practices of the safety bicycle through a contingent spatial and mobility politics found at the intersection of race and technology. For African Americans, the bicycle was both a symbolic and real opportunity to express modern freedoms at the moment those freedoms were being curtailed.

Black cyclists whether they used the bicycle for leisure or utilitarian purposes contested the meanings and limits of mobility in the early Jim Crow period. The South, however, was not the only region of the world where the politics of race shaped bicycle mobilities and this article points to the ways the African American experience of bicycle technology mirrors but does not necessarily replicate places beyond the United States. Histories of the bicycle have tended to emphasise its role in personal and social liberation while ignoring the ways in which the practice of cycling helped maintained existing social orders. Ultimately, this article traces how technological innovations such as the safety bicycle can be both disrupt but also uphold structures of power.

Cycling on the Color Line: Race, Technology, and Bicycle Mobilities in the Early Jim Crow South, 1887-1905

Writing from his home in Paradise, Kentucky in 1896, former Union General Don Carlos Buell complained to his friend, the New York editor and writer James Grant Wilson, that the bicycle was the “most thorough leveler and vulgarizer that ever laid hold upon society. All men, and women, and boys are physically and socially equal on the bicycle.” It is not surprising in a letter in which Buell eulogized the war horses he had rode from the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) through to the Civil War (1861-1865) that the bicycle and its social effects would be the target of his ire. The bicycle was the technology that spelled an end to a world defined by footspeed and horse travel. An intensely modern object that accelerated personal mobility, the bicycle also navigated around the limitations of the railroad timetable. It was powerfully disruptive. That *all* men and women could ride an increasingly affordable bicycle in the 1890s was troubling for whites dividing southern society along racial lines. Social equality, not only in terms of race but also in terms of gender and class, was a major concern in the Jim Crow period and Buell worryingly concluded his letter that the bicycle was “virtually accessible to all classes; and its quick repair condition; and the ease with which the apparently difficult feat of riding is mastered...[now] all sorts of people” could take up the wheel.¹

Nathan Cardon is a Senior Lecturer of United States history at the University of Birmingham. He is currently working on a book entitled *The World Awheel: Americans in the First Global Bicycle Age*. He would like to thank Jethro McGraw for his research assistantship, Matthew Brown, Michell Chresfield, Lorenzo Costaguta, Tom Cutterham, Jonathan Gumz, Steve Hewitt, Martin Hurcombe, Simon Jackson, Anca Mandru, John Munro, and Corey Ross for their comments and critiques of earlier drafts. He would also like to thank Ruth Oldenziel and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments that immensely improved the article.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the modern safety bicycle—diamond frame, chain-driven, and wheels of equal size—became an everyday technology and practice around the world. First manufactured in Coventry, England in 1885, the safety arrived in the United States’ South in 1887 at the beginning of a period of transition from relative Black freedom following the Civil War to a reassertion of white dominance in the social, civic, and political life of the region.² This transition to Jim Crow segregation, argues historian Jane Dailey, was partially dependent on a negotiation of public space between white and Black southerners with street encounters one of the main theatres of African American resistance to the re-establishment of white dominance.³ A technology that enhanced mobility, the bicycle entered a world where the

¹ Don Carlos Buell, Adair [Paradise, Ky.] to James Grant Wilson, New York. 22 November 1896. ALS, 10 pp. octavo. MSS. A B928 10. Buell, Don Carlos Papers, 1813-1961 (Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Ky. [hereinafter FHS]).

² For this article, I define the South as the former states of the Confederacy with the addition of slave-states that remained loyal to the Union. The period between 1883 and 1908 was marked by a series of southern state laws and subsequent Supreme Court decisions that legalized racial segregation, limited Black mobility, and disenfranchised African Americans in the South. This system, known as Jim Crow, would be in place until the civil rights movements of the mid-twentieth century, see Vann Woodward, *Strange Career*; Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; and Hale, *Making Whiteness*. On the bicycle as an “everyday technology” see, Arnold, *Everyday Technology*, 82-85.

³ Dailey, “Deference and Violence,” 555, 587. See also Kelley, ““We Are Not What We Seem,”” 102-110; and Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, *Sidewalks*, esp. chap 5.

rules of racial engagement were in flux but hardening. What cycling historian Evan Friss labels the “spatial flexibility” of the bicycle—the ability of the cyclist to move more freely than other forms of late-nineteenth century transportation—cut to the heart of this nascent spatial order and challenged whites’ best efforts to control Black movement in the early period of *de jure* segregation.⁴

Between 1887 and 1905, the interpretations, values, and practices of the new technology of the safety bicycle challenged but also helped solidify the culture of segregation in the South. The practice of cycling contributed to an increase in the salience of movement and its management as white and Black southerners came to grips with modern technologically facilitated personal mobility. Most writing on the bicycle has emphasized its role in fostering freedom of movement and liberation at the end of the nineteenth century. However, this article makes clear the ways in which a technological innovation can simultaneously disrupt and affirm an existing social order. Histories of the bicycle in the United States have focused almost exclusively on the urban and industrializing North and West Coast paying close attention to class and gender. Only with a few exceptions have they looked at race as a mediator of cycling technology.⁵ Focusing on a key moment of change in the South’s racial regime, this article

⁴ Friss, *Cycling City*, 121-122. Control of African American movement was central to the Jim Crow regime, see Cohen, *At Freedom’s Edge*.

⁵ Historians have just scratched the surface of African American cycling in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This article seeks to build on the insights of Ritchie, “League of American Wheelmen”; Friss, *Cycling City*, 59-61; Finison, *Boston’s Cycling Craze*; and Bloom, ““To Die for a Lousy Bike.”” On the history of the bicycle in the United States, see Smith, *A Social*

explores how white and African American southerners interpreted the meanings and practices of the newly arrived object of the safety bicycle through a contingent spatial and mobility politics found at the intersection of race and technology.⁶

For middle-class and elite African Americans the emergence of the safety bicycle presented a technological and symbolic opportunity to express modern freedoms and subjectivities in ways that offered a new form of what geographers Derek Alderman and Joshua Inwood describe as a “countermobility” against white supremacy.⁷ White southerners, across slavery and freedom, developed multiple apparatuses to control Black mobility and historians have rightfully focused their attention on streetcars and automobiles as new sites for racial contestations over African American movement and status.⁸ Prior to the automobile, however,

History; Tobin, “Bicycle Boom”; Garvey, “Reframing the Bicycle”; Herlihy, *Bicycle*; Finison, *Boston’s Cycling Craze*; Friss, *Cycling City, On Bicycles*, and “Writing Bicycles”; Longhurst, *Bike Battles*; Guroff, *Mechanical Horse*; and Turpin, *First Taste of Freedom*.

⁶ Genevieve Carpio points to the racialization of mobility, including bicycle mobilities, as key to understanding the formation of the modern U.S. state. As Carpio notes, much more work needs to be done linking race and mobility, see *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 4-7, esp. 83-88; and Alderman and Inwood, “Mobility as Antiracism Work,” 601-602. On mobility politics, see Denning, ““Life is Movement, Movement is Life!”” 1480-1482.

⁷ “Countermobility” is the meaningful use of mobility to challenge and subvert racism, see Alderman and Inwood “Mobility as Antiracism Work,” 598, 602.

⁸ On Black mobility, see Finney and Potter, ““You’re out of your place,”” 105. On streetcars, see Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 67-74; Rabinowitz, *Race, Ethnicity, and Urbanization*, 157-

the bicycle offered a radical challenge to Jim Crow that cut to the heart of segregation's spatial politics. The bicycle offered a way to contest an active white supremacist regime at the same time that regime created new systems to control Black mobility.

Black cyclists were frightening to a white society premised on African Americans' supposedly non-industrial race-traits. That African Americans could not only master but excel on one of the quintessential technologies of late-nineteenth century modernity challenged a raft of southern and scientific understandings of the capabilities of African Americans in an industrializing world.⁹ In the 1890s, argues Paul Lawrie, a vigorous debate arose over whether African Americans could even "survive the brave new world of American industrial modernity." That one of the leading voices in this debate, Fredrik Hoffman, based his notion of race fitness on the idea of "vital capacity" (respiratory health) made the bicycle an especially salient technology for racialist and scientific thinking.¹⁰

The United States was just one node in a global mass culture of cycling at the turn-of-the-twentieth century. As one of the first industrial consumer products to reach a global scale, the experience and practice of the bicycle was situated locally: an early example of "glocalization."¹¹ As a result, the southern experience of the safety mirrors but does not necessarily replicate places

158; and Zylstra, "Whiteness, Freedom, and Technology." On automobiles, see Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*, chap 4, esp. 108-111; and Gilroy, "Get Free," 4-54.

⁹ For much of its history the safety bicycle was viewed as quintessentially modern, see Oldenziel, "Whose Modernism, Whose Speed?" 278; and Norcliffe, *Ride to Modernity*.

¹⁰ Lawrie, *Forging a Laboring Race*, 19, esp. chap. 1. See also Baker, *From Savage to Negro*, 79-80; and Bender, *American Abyss*, 88-90.

¹¹ Oldenziel and de la Bruhèze, "Cycling," 24-25

beyond the United States. Studying local adoption of the bicycle, as Tiina Männistö-Funk suggests, can reveal “crossroads where global innovations conversed with local traditions [and practices].”¹² Prior to the Great Migration of African Americans out of the South during World War I, the bicycle’s intersection of race and technology and the political responses to it placed the region on the vanguard of a new “modern globality.”¹³ Across the imperial world—in places such as India, Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Africa—the bicycle was adapted and adopted for different cultural and political mobilizations that both empowered colonial subjects and were exploited by imperial and white-settler authorities.¹⁴ What made the experience of bicycle technology in the South different from these spaces, however, was that it did not follow the same downward trajectory to a racialized working or subaltern class. Although more African Americans took up cycling as the cost of bicycles declined across the decade of the 1890s, economic and racial barriers kept many from embracing cycling for leisure or utilitarian purposes.

To understand the bicycle as a technology and practice, then, we must see past its most visible users—the white men and women of the working and middle classes. As Wiebe Bijker

¹² Männistö-Funk, “Crossroads of Technology,” 755. Arnold and DeWald make a similar point, see “Cycles of Empowerment,” 973.

¹³ On the periphery’s relationship with modern globality and technology, see Ogle, “Whose Time Is It?” 1376-1402; *Global Transformation*; and Bayly, *Birth of the Modern*.

¹⁴ Arnold and DeWald, “Cycles of Empowerment,” 972-974, 989-994; Arnold, *Everyday Technology*; Pante, “Mobility and Modernity”; Smethurst, *The Bicycle*; and Morgan, *Cycling Cities: Johannesburg*.

has argued, the “meanings given by a relevant social group actually *constitute* the artefact.”¹⁵

The bicycle, by 1900, had a diverse group of users around the world that intersected with raced, classed, and gendered identities, giving the technology a variety and occasionally contradictory meanings. Studying the adoption of the bicycle and the practice of cycling at the moment of formation of a new racial state allows us to better view, as Nina Lerman and Geoff Zylstra argue, the ways power and difference contribute to the values, meanings, and experiences of a newly constituted technological object.¹⁶ Ideologies of power such as race shaped the very fabric of global society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and in turn the technologies these societies produced. In the South, the politics of race helped constitute the bicycle, just as the bicycle shaped the meanings, practices, contestations, and resonance of personal mobility in the early Jim Crow period.

The South, the Safety Bicycle, and the Politics of Race

Safer and easier to use than the high-wheeler, the safety bicycle, when combined with the recently developed pneumatic tire, moved quickly from a high-tech and elite consumer good to

¹⁵ Bijker, *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs*, 77. See also, Kline and Pinch, “Users as Agents of Technological Change,” 766-768.

¹⁶ On the formation of racial states, see Goldberg, *Racial State*, 9, 98. On race and the solidification of technology, see Zylstra, “Whiteness, Freedom, and Technology,” 680-681; Lerman “Categories of Difference, Categories of Power,” 893-918, esp. 900-904; de la Peña, “History of Technology,” 921-926. On the racialization of cycling mobility in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, see Carpio, *Collisions*, 75-88; and Bloom, ““To Die for a Lousy Bike.””

one of the most popular and celebrated technologies of the 1890s. By the end of the decade, the American bicycle industry had produced between five and eight million bicycles, while companies pioneered narrative advertisements and annual model changes that created a large secondary market.¹⁷ With a glut of new, used, and rental bicycles, the safety bicycle quickly declined in cost and, importantly, status. By the start of the twentieth-century the bicycle industry in the United States had all but collapsed. Nevertheless, the presence of thousands of cyclists on city streets and rural roads shaped public policy, set legal precedents, and influenced city design as politicians and social commentators came to grips with, in the words of historian Harry Oosterhuis, the bicycle's "disruptive restlessness." This disruption led to a consolidation of power by authorities over the everyday movement of citizens as various levels of government reacted to the presence of the bicycle.¹⁸

The South, with its agricultural economy, small cities, and poor roads, may not seem to us today as an ideal place for the bicycle but at the end of the nineteenth century many southerners enthusiastically took up cycling. In April 1887, Kentucky cyclists reported an English safety's arrival in Cincinnati and by June a safety was paraded through the streets of Louisville.¹⁹ By 1895, the South, like the rest of the world, was in the midst of the cycling boom. At the start of the 1890s New Orleans was arguably the region's preeminent cycling city but was

¹⁷ Friss, *Cycling City*, 20-23, 32; and Garvey, "Reframing the Bicycle," 67.

¹⁸ Oosterhuis, "Cycling, Modernity and National Culture," 238; and Longhurst, *Bike Battles*, 43-48.

¹⁹ "Kentucky Notings," *The Wheel: A Journal of Cycling and Recreation*, April 22, 1887, p. 397; and "Kentucky Kronicles," *ibid.*, June 17, 1887, p. 582.

displaced by the industrializing New South cities of Atlanta and Louisville. In 1894, Louisville boasted fourteen bicycle dealers and eight repair shops, while one out of every seventy-five or just under three-thousand Louisvillians went about their daily business on two wheels.²⁰

Atlanta's fourteen dealers sold roughly seven-thousand bicycles between January and June of 1896 with at least one claiming it had orders for another two-thousand. Even Tuscaloosa, Alabama could boast of being the "best cycle town of its size in the state" with 175 cyclists out of a population of four-thousand. Richmond, Memphis, Birmingham, Nashville, and Savannah all had sizable cycling cultures in the 1890s.²¹

The increased presence of cyclists in the South meant that state and local governments needed to interfere, often for the first time, with the everyday movement of their white citizens. In the first instance, cyclists had to obtain a legal right to the road. Southern cyclists, like their counterparts across the nation, pushed for "liberty bills" that granted the bicycle a codified status on public ways. With the massive increase in popularity of the safety, politicians turned to

²⁰ "Harry H. Hodgson," *The American Cyclist*, June 1890, p. 75; "Riding a Nightmare," *The Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, October 21, 1892, p. 15; Somers, "City on Wheels"; Briney, "Flash Back to Fontaine Ferry 54 Years Ago Today." In 1897, the *Courier-Journal* counted 2,836 cyclists commuting to work from 5:30 to 8:30 AM at the intersection of Fourth and Walnut, see Ward, "Bicycling," 88.

²¹ "Snap Shots of Southern Cycling," *Southern Cyclist*, April 1895. FHS; "The Georgia Metropolis," *ibid.*, June 10, 1896; and "'Way Down South in Dixie': Past and Present in the Land of Cotton, Cinnamon Seed and Sandy Bottom," *The Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, August 3, 1899, pp. 23-24.

regulation and taxation. In 1896, New Orleans issued a series of traffic codes that required cyclists to carry a lantern after dark, keep one hand at all times on the handlebar, to abstain from riding on sidewalks, and go no faster than 10-miles an hour. Similar ordinances could be found across the region. In Atlanta, a city councilor proposed that bicycles should maintain a distance of six-feet from other vehicles, carry lamps and bells, and have a speed limit of six-miles per hour. The motion was defeated due to the efforts of Mayor Collier, a devoted “wheelman.”²² In a region where only African American movement was routinely regulated, municipal ordinances, licensing, and taxation directed at cyclists governed the mobility of all users regardless of their race, class, or gender and marked a radical change through which white southerners experienced the state. The bicycle and the personal freedom it cultivated came to embody a central tension in modern state-formation: how best to control the increasingly chaotic movement of urban citizens?²³ What initially concerned southern whites, however, was the symbolic salience of African American cyclists.

²² “Louisiana’s Liberty Bill on the Calendar,” *Wheel and Cycling*, June 29, 1888, p. 395; “Louisiana’s Liberty Bill Labeled ‘Useless Legislation’,” *ibid.*, July 6, 1888, p. 419; “Anti-Liberty Bill,” *ibid.*, March 8, 1889, p. 21; and “News from Everywhere,” *The American Cyclist*, July 1890, p. 106. “Special tax upon specified articles,” *Alabama Legislative Acts, 1896-1897*, p. 130. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL; “Georgia,” *Wheel and Cycling*, May 18, 1888, 245; and “A Modern Miracle,” *Southern Cyclist*, June 10, 1897. FHS. On liberty bills, see Longhurst, *Bike Battles*, 36, 44-45; and Somers, “City on Wheels,” 228.

²³ Arnold and DeWald, “Cycles of Empowerment,” 989-995, esp. 991.

In the 1890s to ride a bicycle was sign of one's civilizational and racial status. "[T]he perfection of the bicycle was the greatest incident in the nineteenth century," reported the *Detroit Tribune* in 1896. "When we think of the effect upon the race of endowing practically all of the people with means of greatly accelerated locomotion, the imagination knows no bounds....Less momentous and less universal circumstances than the wheel have strongly affected racial characteristics."²⁴ Across the globe the bicycle was frequently thought of and advertised as a symbol and technology of white civilization.²⁵ The inability or perceived inability to ride a bicycle was sign of one's primitive nature, incapable of participating in the new world of industrial modernity. Fearful of the implications for African Americans' "racial characteristics" if they took up cycling, whites frequently belittled Black cyclists. American cycling periodicals, as early as 1887, featured short articles describing African Americans' failure to master the two-wheeler. An article in *Bearings* told a story of an African American sharecropper who cowered in fear and shouted "flying devil" when he first encountered a bicycle. The bicycle also appeared in the day's racist popular culture: from the Darktown comics to minstrel shows to the fictional "Thompson Street Colored Bicycle Club." All of which was meant to not only undermine African Americans' right to the road but to question African American mastery of industrial technology.²⁶

²⁴ Quoted in Smith, *Social History*, 47.

²⁵ Iskin, "Savages' into Spectators/Consumers," 134-136.

²⁶ See for example, "Kentucky Kronicles," *The Wheel: A Journal of Cycling and Recreation*, July 8, 1887, p. 649; "Wheel Gossip," *The Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, September 19, 1890, p. 107; and "E. L. Evans, From Louisville to Atlanta," *Southern Cyclist*, December 1895.

Given its emblematic relationship to white civilization, the social group most concerned with the symbolic presence of Black cyclists were the elite white men who ran the nation's largest cycling organization, the League of American Wheelmen (LAW). In 1894, on the first page of the first issue of the *Southern Cyclist*, a periodical closely aligned with the League and the only magazine devoted to cycling in the South during the boom period, the racial, sexual, and social repercussions and politics of the bicycle were clear to the journal: "A colored man served in an official capacity at a recent race in Philadelphia, and now the colored women are going to wear bloomers in Louisville. Where are we 'at' any way," asked the *Cyclist*.²⁷

Through the first half of the 1890s, the League of American Wheelmen was gripped with sectional divisions and fractious debate over what the *American Cyclist* in 1892 estimated to be

FHS; "Comment by nibs," *Bearings: The Cycling Authority of America*, November 17, 1893 (quote); "Darktown Bicycling: A Tender Pair," 1897. *Currier & Ives: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1983), Prints & Photographs, Library of Congress. Accessed September 12, 2018: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/91724364/>; Paul Webster Eaton (words) and Minnie Boyd Upperman (music), "Lily Crow: Bicycle Darkie Song" (New York: Hitchcock Publishing); M. Quad, "Work of the Wheel," *The Enterprise Weekly* (Natchez, Miss.), May 27, 1897; "Thompson Street Bicycle Club," *The Evening Star*, August 15, 1896, p. 18; "For Poker An' Bike," *Santé Fe New Mexican*, September 8, 1896; and "'Twas A Great Show," *The Hawaiian Star*, September 29, 1896, p. 7.

²⁷ "No Title," *The Southern Cyclist*, October 1, 1894. FHS.

only seven African Americans out of a total of thirty-five thousand members.²⁸ At the national convention that year, Louisville lawyer William Watts brought forth a motion to ban Black cyclists but failed to bring the issue to a vote. LAW members' views on the question split along sectional lines that had long divided the political history of the United States. In Kentucky the local state division took it upon themselves to ban Black cyclists from joining.²⁹ The Louisiana division chose to withdraw from the LAW altogether and encouraged other "Southern States to do likewise in the event of negroes being admitted membership."³⁰ At the 1893 national convention, southern members again agitated for a lily-white organization. Faced with calls for secession from the League, a compromise was offered to the southern divisions, including Missouri, to allow each state to set their own racial policy. Led by Watts, southern members flatly refused. Watts practically begged northern members to "[r]elieve us in the South from this embarrassment, don't force us to associate with the negro."³¹ Despite his pleas the motion failed but only by seven votes. With the 1894 national convention set for Louisville, Watts and the other southern divisions were prepared to get the motion passed.

²⁸ "The Color Line," *The American Cyclist*, March 1, 1893, p. 105. Andrew Ritchie has given the most detailed account of the LAW's move to a whites-only policy, see Ritchie, "The League of American Wheelmen," 17-28. See also, Finison, *Boston's Cycling Craze*, 39-40; and Smith, *Social History*, 162-163.

²⁹ "Kentucky Division Meet," *Wheel and Cycling*, July 1, 1892, p. 24.

³⁰ "No Title," *Wheel and Cycling*, Aug. 12, 1892, p. 18.

³¹ "Negroes Not Excluded," *Bearings*, Feb. 24, 1893; and "Will the South Secede?" *Bearings*, Feb. 17, 1893.

Leading up to the meeting in Kentucky, southern members reported to the national press declining membership. The Tennessee division had fallen to 150 members and blamed the decline on the “negro question.” Likewise, the chief consul of the Alabama division blamed the “one hundred riders of color” in Birmingham for its drop.³² In Louisville, Watts softened his approach, suggesting that it was only by barring African Americans that the South could reach its potential as a cycling region. His case was helped by the publication of two letters attributed to prominent Black cyclists: Frederick H. Scott, president of Louisville’s African American Union Cycle Club, and a young Marshall ‘Major’ Taylor who would go on to become one of the world’s most famous professional racing cyclists. Scott argued that the likely increase of white members after a color-bar would further “highway improvement” and thereby benefit all cyclists. Taylor suggested that northern members only wanted Black members because they could manipulate the Black vote and concluded his letter: “We want nothing from the south, north, east, or west but that which we are entitled to, and that is certainly not members to any white man’s league of wheelmen.”³³

The tension within League reflected an increasingly contentious national debate over Black civil rights in the 1890s. As the close vote in 1893 indicated, white views across the nation

³² “Stray Shots: The South Negro,” *Bearings*, Dec. 1893; “Chief Consul Harris Has no Love for Negroes,” *ibid.*, Jan. 12, 1894.

³³ “The Negro Barred,” *Bearings*, Feb. 23, 1894; and Major Taylor, “The Other Side,” *ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1894.

were hardening against African Americans.³⁴ With the 1894 vote a secret ballot, northern delegates did not need to publicly support a color line and the amendment carried the day by a vote of 127 to 54 for inserting “white” into the LAW’s membership criteria with only the Massachusetts delegation coming out unanimously against it. The decision was quickly condemned by Black cycling clubs.³⁵ Two years later in 1896 the Supreme Court would legalize racial segregation through its “separate but equal” ruling. Farther afield, the debate over adding “white” to membership criteria was reported on by the French press as colonial powers grappled with the falling cost and widespread use of the bicycle by colonized subjects. While there was a concerted effort to overturn the decision in 1897, the criteria remained in place throughout the first boom period and beyond.³⁶

White southerners’ efforts to prevent African Americans from joining the main national organization of American cyclists after 1894 speaks to the powerful racial symbolism of the bicycle in the first half of the 1890s when it remained an expensive and elite technology. For a

³⁴ In 1893, the Associated Cycling Clubs of Chicago, for instance, barred black riders from entering the city’s and one of the nation’s marquee events, the Pullman Road Race, see Ritchie, “League,” 18. Across the nation Black life was increasingly regulated and policed by the end of the century, see Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*.

³⁵ Ritchie, “League,” 20-21; and Finison, *Boston’s Cycling Craze*, 18, 158-159.

³⁶ “Cyclisme,” *Gils Blas*, 18 mars 1894, p. 3-4; “Sport Vélocipedique: De la Nouvelle-Orleans,” *La Lanterne: Journal Politique Quotidien*, 28 février 1894, p. 3; “Cyclisme,” *La Justice*, 28 février 1894. Although not enforced after cycling’s decline in popularity, it was not officially repealed until 1999, see Ritchie, “League of American Wheelmen,” 20-22, 28.

small group of African Americans, participation in the League of American Wheelmen represented a new status in a world of freedom, while giving an opportunity to race against whites in League-sanctioned events.³⁷ As the cost of bicycles declined sharply in 1897, however, more African American southerners took up cycling and began to use its “disruptive restlessness” and “spatial flexibility” to navigate around Jim Crow.

African American Cyclists and the Racial Politics of Mobility

It is difficult to determine the extent of Black participation in the bicycle boom but one can catch fragments of a diverse and flourishing African American cycling culture across the nation. There were, for instance, Black cycling clubs in Chicago, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Newark.³⁸ Across the South, where ninety percent of African Americans lived at the turn of the twentieth century, Black men and women also took up cycling. With the cost of new bicycles declining from \$150 dollars in 1893 to \$80 dollars in 1897 and falling as low as \$15 dollars by 1902, many African Americans in professional occupations and even some laborers were able to afford a new bicycle, purchase a used one, or rent one by the week, day, or

³⁷ Both Andrew Ritchie and Lorenz Finison note that for many LAW members racing against and possibly losing to African Americans was a real fear, see Ritchie, “League,” 24-25; and Finison, *Boston’s Cycling Craze*.

³⁸ On African American cycling in the North in this period, see Ritchie, “League,” esp., 16-17; Friss, *Cycling City*, 59-61; and Finison, *Boston’s Cycling Craze*.

hour.³⁹ At the same time, while the bicycle was more affordable, over half of African Americans lived in the South's rural areas and were entrapped in a system of cyclical debt known as sharecropping that left many at subsistence or below levels.⁴⁰ Despite the decline in cost, then, the bicycle remained out of reach for many African Americans and its use limited by white policing of Black mobility under Jim Crow. For the African American elite and those members of an aspiring class who could afford it, however, the bicycle fit well with the "politics of respectability," was a symbol of social and economic advancement, and laid claim to the South's public spaces.⁴¹

³⁹ "Way Down in Dixie," *Wheel and Cycling*, p. 24; and "New Bicycles for Rent: By the week, day or hour," *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 29, 1899, p. 6. On the declining cost of bicycles, see Tobin, "Bicycle Boom of the 1890s," 840-41.

⁴⁰ According to the 1900 census, only 1.3 percent of Black men and 1.6 percent of Black women were classified as professionals; 25.5 percent of men were laborers and 33 percent of women were in private service (domestic and laundry work); while 53.5 percent of men and 36.1 percent of women worked in agriculture, see Maloney, "African Americans in the Twentieth Century." On sharecropping and debt peonage, see Wright, *Old South, New South*; Royce, *Origins of Southern Sharecropping*; and Schultz, *Rural Face of White Supremacy*.

⁴¹ Class terms of working, middle, and elite do not always fit neatly with the Black experience in this period. Following on from the work of Michele Mitchell, I use the term "middle-class" to refer to an aspirational ideology of "race progress" as much as an economic class, see Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, xx, 9-10; and Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 14-17. On the politics of respectability, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*.

Unlike in Europe where cycling was embraced by the working class as the cost of bicycles declined, in the United States it remained primarily a social and recreational activity.⁴² As a result, aspiring and middle-class African Americans participated in the recreational culture of cycling as a symbol of their “racial progress” and to challenge claims that African Americans were unsuitable for the new world of modern leisure [Figure 1].⁴³ In a similar fashion, as one of the key objects in a growing sense of American “consumer citizenship,” owning and riding a bicycle whether for recreational or utilitarian purposes was a deeply symbolic act at a time when African Americans’ political citizenship was eroding. For elite, middle-class, and some members of the African American working class, participating in the consumer culture of cycling was a contestation of the confines of Jim Crow. It also, however, pointed to the political limits of capitalist consumption as a marker of citizenship.⁴⁴

As early as 1887, Washington, DC had an established African American cycling club, although *The Wheel and Recreation* was quick to clarify the members’ “lighter complexion,” in

⁴² Friss, *Cycling City*, 10, 198-199.

⁴³ On African American leisure, class, and racial progress, see Kahrl, ““The Slightest Semblance of Unruliness,”” esp., 1110 & 1131. See also Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, esp. chap 1.

⁴⁴ Paul Gilroy makes this point when exploring the meanings of automobility for African Americans, see Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue*, 4-54, esp. 11, 20-21. On bicycles and citizenship, see Garvey, “Reframing the Bicycle,” 80-82; and Friss, *Cycling City*, 57. On the consumer citizen, see McGovern, *Sold American*.

order to make sense of it.⁴⁵ That year in Pine Bluff, Arkansas a group pooled resources and purchased a second-hand bicycle with the purpose of starting a club.⁴⁶ In 1896, the African American Ideal Cycle Club in DC proposed a scheme to buy six-acres of land to build a quarter-mile track that would attract the “better class of colored residents” to the pleasure ground.⁴⁷ Some Black clubs, like the “Senegambian Cyclers” of St. Louis asserted their industrial modernity and a historical link to Africa.⁴⁸ Other clubs sprung up in the New South cities of Charlotte and Louisville.⁴⁹ Louisville would have two Black cycling clubs in the 1890s, the Union Cycle Club established in 1894 and the Booker T. Washington Cycle Club run out of the Allen Chapel AME Church in 1899. Prominent African American intellectual and activist W. E. B. DuBois was a keen cyclist, owned multiple bicycles, and was a member of the English

⁴⁵ “Washington Notes,” *The Wheel: A Journal of Cycling and Recreation*, April 22, 1887, p. 397.

See also, “The Wheeling World: Cross Country Cycle Club,” *The Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), September 11, 1897, p. 19.

⁴⁶ S. G. Smith, “Arkansas Antics,” *The Wheel*, April 22, 1887, p. 397.

⁴⁷ “Picked Men to Race,” *Evening Star*, July, 4, 1896, p. 21.

⁴⁸ “St. Louis,” *The Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, October 18, 1889, p. 153.

⁴⁹ “The Last Colored Run,” *Daily Charlotte Observer*, September 26, 1894, p. 4; “Colored Cyclists to Run,” *Daily Charlotte Observer*, March 18, 1896, p. 4; “A Day’s Rounds,” *Daily Charlotte Observer*, August 5, 1896, p. 4; “State News,” *The Progressive Farmer* (Winston, North Carolina), July 3, 1894, p. 3; “Negroes are Indignant,” *Bearings*, March 9, 1894.

Cycling Tourist Club.⁵⁰ Middle-class African Americans, like their white counterparts, organized and participated in public bicycles parades, decorating their bicycles with lanterns, ribbon, and other regalia.⁵¹

Like some middle-class white women, who embraced the bicycle as a symbol of the “New Woman,” aspiring African American women also took up the wheel. Cycling increased feminine mobility and sparked an intense transnational debate on the appropriateness of cycling for women. At the same time, cycling was both a public and class performance. While bloomers and trousers made headlines, the vast majority of women cyclists continued to wear dresses and atop a luxury item more often demonstrated a dependence on their husband or father’s wealth, notes historian Anne-Katrin Ebert. Women cyclists’ public performance was also often

⁵⁰ “Bicycle Clubs (Wheelmen), Louisville, KY,” *Notable Kentucky African Americans Database*, accessed September 18, 2018: <http://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2789>; and Shipton, Ernest. Letter from Ernest Shipton to W. E. B. Du Bois, April 17, 1904. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312); and Hoggan, Frances. Letter from Frances Hoggan to W. E. B. Du Bois, March 24, 1907. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

⁵¹ “Bicycle Parade,” *Weekly Pelican* (New Orleans), February 26, 1887, p. 2; “The Colored Odd Fellows,” *The Morning News* (Savannah, Ga.), August 11, 1898, p. 8; and “The Big Bicycle Parade,” *The Great Negro Fair. Bulletin No. 2. Raleigh, North Carolina, October, 1904*, p. 2. Available from *Documenting the American South*. Accessed July 12, 2018:

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/fair/fair.html>

sexualized, commandeered, and consumed by a male gaze.⁵² For African American women the bicycle and cycling played into an intersectional politics that could include both Black women's liberation as well as maintaining and asserting class distinctions linked to conspicuous consumption.⁵³

In the small coastal town of Brunswick, Georgia local African American women formed their own cycling club.⁵⁴ In Harrisonburg, Virginia the Rose-bud Literary Society debated the question "Should women ride bicycles?" "While the negative made a good showing," reported the *Richmond Planet*, "the affirmative discussed very vividly and won the argument."⁵⁵ The African American newspaper *The Indianapolis Freeman* advised Black women to keep proper compartments while a wheel: "Be sure to pin your hat on securely; it will pay you in comfort as well as appearance," suggested the paper.⁵⁶ In Atlanta in 1895, at a time when bicycles remained expensive items, an unnamed African American woman posed with her bicycle for a staged photo [**Figure 2**]. In the photographer's studio, she stands wearing Victorian dress with her right foot on the pedal as if to cycle away. She proudly displays the bicycle, holding it out in front of

⁵² Ebert, "Liberating Technologies?" 25-52, esp. 41; and Garvey, "Reframing the Bicycle," 66-101. Like the new middle-class female pedestrians, women cyclists had to learn to govern their behavior as both public and sexualized objects, see Rabinovitz, *For the Love Pleasure*.

⁵³ On the classed and gendered politics within the African American community in this period, see Hunter, *To 'joy my freedom*, esp. chaps. three and seven.

⁵⁴ "Pen and Punctures," *Wheel and Cycling*, August 21, 1896, p. 52.

⁵⁵ "In Harrisonburg," *The Richmond (Va.) Planet*, March 5, 1898, p. 4.

⁵⁶ "Women on Wheels," *The Freeman* (Indianapolis), May 29, 1897, p. 2.

her, as a symbol of her class status. In doing so, she not only participated in the gendered politics surrounding women's cycling but also contested the Jim Crow South's effort to restrict both the economic and physical mobility of African Americans. For most African American women, however, such displays of wealth were out of reach. Likewise, such a demonstration of radical mobility was a dangerous calculation at a time when public displays of Black wealth were often met with white intimidation and violence.⁵⁷

Beyond the bourgeois symbolism of owning a bicycle, cycling did offer African Americans a practical means to navigate around the South's increasingly segregated public transit systems. *The Richmond Planet*, reporting on Newport News' decision to introduce Jim Crowed streetcars in 1906, advised that city's Black population to take up cycling. "It has been so long since we had our feet on a streetcar in Richmond," noted the paper, "that we have well-nigh forgotten the feeling of electric travelling."⁵⁸ While few periodicals stated so plainly why African Americans took up cycling, it is clear when examining accident reports in southern newspapers that a broad swath of African Americans did embrace the bicycle and not just for recreational purposes. Indeed, mentions of African American cyclists increased dramatically in southern newspapers after the decline in cost in 1897. At the same time, such reporting was no

⁵⁷ Kuhns, "African American Woman with a Bicycle" (1895), Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia. Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 121-240.

⁵⁸ The late date of this report and its place in an African American newspaper provides further evidence for the ongoing middle-class nature of Black cycling in the South, see "Trouble at Newport News," *Richmond (Va.) Planet*, January 13, 1906, p. 4.

doubt meant to single out Black cyclists and call into question African Americans' ability to control and tame bicycle technology.

Ranging from minor fines to accidental death, southern newspapers paint a picture of a region in which a town as small as Accomack, Virginia had a Black cycling presence that was interchangeably monitored and suppressed. The *Durham Daily Globe* reported a Black cyclist narrowly escaping an oncoming train. In Newport News an African American was fined two-dollars for riding on the sidewalk. Tragically, a 5-year-old was struck and killed when he dashed in front of a Black cyclist in Wilmington, North Carolina. In Bamberg, South Carolina a man exiting a streetcar was struck and killed by an African American man whizzing past on his bicycle. Given the spatial flexibility that allowed African Americans to avoid segregated conveyances, it is also clear that where and when they could white police arrested Black cyclists. As was the case of Jim Murray, Macon, Georgia's only African American cyclist and the first to be arrested for breaking the city's new bicycle ordinances. Such ordinances could and were used to stop many African Americans from cycling.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ "A Coon Cyclist," *Macon Telegraph*, May 5, 1893, p. 5; "'Katie, Bar the Door,'" *The Durham Daily Globe* (North Carolina), August 14, 1894, p. 1; "Will Help Inaugurate," *Norfolk Virginian*, February 16, 1897, p. 6; "Items of All Sorts," *The Semi-Weekly Landmark* (Statesville, NC), June 4, 1897, p. 4; "Police Court," *Norfolk Virginian*, July 11, 1897, p. 2; "State News," *Statesville* (North Carolina) *Landmark*, December 10, 1897, p. 2; "Gave Him a Thrashing," *Norfolk Virginian*, February 11, 1898, p. 5; "Are Spaniards 'Portegees'," *The Semi-Weekly Messenger* (Wilmington, N.C.), July 29, 1898, p. 8; "Brief Items of Interest," *Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk), April 19, 1899, p. 6; "Way Down in Dixie," *Wheel and Cycling*, p. 24; "Negro Bicyclist Fined,"

Violence was also always lurking beneath the surface in many of these encounters. In Norfolk, Virginia two white railroad clerks attacked an African American cyclist after all three of them were involved in a cycling collision. Significantly, the violence occurred only after the Black cyclist “became abusive” when the railroad clerks remonstrated him for his supposedly poor cycling. Not deferring to the white men and asserting his rights to both the bicycle and Norfolk’s streets, the African American cyclist participated in the quotidian spatial and mobility politics that challenged Jim Crow even if there was a physical cost.⁶⁰

One dramatic example of the how the bicycle facilitated African American mobility as well as whites’ anger comes from the Wilmington massacre and coup of 1898. In November, a mob of armed white citizens in Wilmington, North Carolina overthrew the city’s democratically elected bi-racial government and destroyed the city’s Black newspaper, the *Wilmington Daily Record*. Between thirteen and sixty African Americans were murdered and two-thousand-one hundred Black citizens fled the city after the massacre. What was once a flourishing middle-class

Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), September 26, 1899, p. 3; “Brief Items of Interest,” *Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk), December 1, 1899, p. 6; “North Carolina,” *The Semi-Weekly Messenger* (Wilmington), Sept. 25, 1900, p. 2; “Negro Heavily Punished,” *Richmond Times*, January 14, 1902, p. 8; “Local News,” *Peninsula Enterprise* (Accomack, Va.), April 6, 1901, p. 3; and “Hurt in Bicycle Accident,” *The Bamberg Herald* (South Carolina), September 14, 1905, p. 1. Carpio notes a similar clampdown on Japanese movement in California through bicycle ordinances, see Carpio, *Collisions*, 85.

⁶⁰ “Gave Him a Thrashing,” *The Norfolk Virginian*, Feb. 11, 1898, p. 5. On the everyday politics of Jim Crow, see Kelley, “We Are not What We Seem,” 76-79.

community was left devastated and largely destroyed.⁶¹ In 1900, African American journalist David Bryan Fulton using the *nom de plume*, “Jack Thorne,” published a semi-fictionalized exposé of the massacre, in which he outlined, among other things, the role of the bicycle as a symbol of Black advancement as well as a means to avoid white terrorists in Wilmington.

Fulton placed the *Wilmington Daily Record*'s championing of “good roads” and “bicycle paths” as second only to its exposure of unsanitary conditions in the city's Black hospital as the newspaper's greatest achievements. African American cyclists, according to Fulton, were an abhorrence to whites in Wilmington. In a fictionalized afternoon tea between two white women a year after the massacre, the bicycle was a symbol for Black wealth accumulation and the disruption of the South's spatial order. “Go to Seventh street on a Sunday or on a week-day for that matter,” Fulton had the white women complain, “the sight is heart sickening! There Sambo and his women, dressed to death, strut along with heads erect, looking as important as though they owned the city, or, astride their bicycles, they'll ride plumb over you.” In the end, the women were proud that their “true and patriotic men, blue-blooded Southern gentlemen” had put an end to such “high-stepping” as African Americans riding bicycles in Wilmington.⁶² In the year before the coup, and as bicycles became more affordable, Wilmington's white newspaper, the *Semi-Weekly Messenger*, noted that “five recent accidents in the city from bicycle riding, were produced by negroes” and wondered aloud whether “the riders deliberately purposed

⁶¹ Zucchino, *Wilmington's Lie*, 189-199, 342; and Cecelski and Tyson, eds. *Democracy Betrayed*.

⁶² Jack Thorne, *Hanover; or, The Persecution of the Lowly. Story of the Wilmington Massacre* (M. C. L. Hill, 1900), 13, 112.

committing the wrong,” ominously concluding that “it would be very grievous if this were the case.”⁶³ African American cyclists challenged the racial enclosure of space and class in the city and were met with a violent white reaction on the streets of Wilmington.⁶⁴

The bicycle, however, played another role in the coup. Fulton recounts the daring escape of the Reverend Hiland Silkirk by bicycle. Alarmed by the sound of gun shots on the morning of November 10th, Silkirk mounted his bicycle to investigate when he was approached by “another bicyclist breathlessly pedaling toward him.” Dr. Sawyer, a white minister, had come to warn Silkirk, a prominent African American transplant from Boston, that a mob had assembled to lynch him. With the horse-mounted “bandits...only a few blocks away,” Silkirk quickly cycled out of reach of the fast approaching vigilantes, hiding in the woods for two days before sneaking onto a train and escaping the South. Whether this story was completely true or not is beside the point. White and Black southerners, according to Fulton, viewed the violence in Wilmington as the result of the city’s spatial politics in which bicycle mobilities played a significant and symbolic role.⁶⁵

The bicycle was an essential symbol of African American freedom and politics in Wilmington. It allowed members of the Black middle class to navigate around segregated trains,

⁶³ “The Bicycle,” *The Semi-Weekly Messenger* (Wilmington, Va.), December 17, 1897, p. 2.

⁶⁴ This was a common critique of cyclists around the world as bicycling moved down the socio-economic ladder and became more utilitarian, see Morgan, *Cycling Cities: Johannesburg*.

⁶⁵ It is unclear if Silkirk was a real or fictionalized person. I have not found him in the historical record. Thorne, *Hanover*, 98-103. On the Wilmington massacre and spatial politics, see Dailey, “Deference and Violence,” 588-89.

streetcars, and, perhaps, even terrorists. Such day-to-day acts of resistance in public space was crucial to the development of African American mobility politics across the Jim Crow South. When African Americans—no matter their class or gender—cycled for leisure or utilitarian purposes, posed publicly with their bicycles, advocated in newspaper and magazines their right to the road, and participated in both large and “small-scale skirmishes,” they entered into an uneven negotiation over the contours, meanings, and politics of segregation.⁶⁶ In the 1890s, the bicycle was mobilized as a technology to resist the solidification of Jim Crow. For a smaller group of Black racing cyclists, however, the bicycle was a chance to not only challenge restrictions placed on Black life but demonstrate African American abilities at the cutting-edge of modernity.

The Industrial Body and African American Racing Cyclists

In the sporting world of the Jim Crow South, Black racing cyclists were often denied a chance to race against whites. One reason the southern LAW was so keen to ban Black members was that whites did not want to race African Americans: “Admit the negro to our races, then you kill the races in this section of the country,” complained one southern member.⁶⁷ Whereas Black jockeys had a long-established history in the South, the modernity of the bicycle and its racial possibilities meant that many whites resisted or simply refused to race African Americans.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem,” 102-103.

⁶⁷ “A Voice from the South,” *Wheel and Cycle*, May 13, 1892, 19. See also, “Atlanta

Wheelmen’s Hundred,” *Bearings*, July 20, 1894; “The Color Question Again” *ibid.*, November 10, 1893; and “No Black in Theirs,” *ibid.*, November 17, 1893.

⁶⁸ Mooney, *Race Horse Men*, esp. chapters 6 & 7.

Nevertheless, some working-class African American men turned to bicycle racing as way to earn a living and participate in this new world of speed and modernity. Across the South, one can catch fragmentary evidence of separate African American bicycle leagues, races, and tournaments.

In 1896, the *Southern Cyclist* published a letter from the “colored champion” of Kentucky requesting sponsorship from the Monarch Cycle Company. The *Norfolk Virginian* reported that Gilliam Obey, the “champion colored cyclist” of the city, was arrested for assault in July 1897. There is also enticing but limited evidence for a national African American cycling championship. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported at the end of 1896 that the city hosted a series of national races and that the “five-mile United States colored championship was won by H. W. Freeman.” Also in 1896, Savannah’s *The Morning News* reported on the arrival of a “delegation” of African American cyclists from Jacksonville, Florida, six of whom were in the city to race. The best evidence for a thriving Black racing scene, however, was the emergence of professional African American cyclists whose movements beyond the borders of the United States defied the regulation of Black mobility in the South and nation.⁶⁹

The most famous African American cyclist of the day was Indianapolis-born Marshall “Major” Taylor, who in 1899 became the world champion and was one of the richest and most

⁶⁹ “The World Do Move,” *Southern Cyclist*, February 25, 1896. FHS; “Police Court,” *Norfolk Virginian*, July 11, 1897, p. 2; “Cyclists are Baggage,” *Atlanta Constitution*, December 13, 1896, p. 2; and “In the Railroad World,” *The Morning News* (Savannah, Ga.), August 17, 1896, p. 8. See also, “Gossip of the Wheelmen,” *New York Herald*, July 14, 1894, p. 11; and “Colored Riders Will Race,” *The Morning News* (Savannah, Ga.), June 11, 1899, p. 8.

well-known athletes in the world.⁷⁰ In the winter of 1898, Taylor arrived in Savannah, Georgia to take advantage of the warmer weather to train but before he could step onto the cycling track he was presented with a letter from “the White Riders” that gave him 24-hours to leave the city.⁷¹ That Taylor could beat the best white Americans meant that he was essentially forced to race in exile in France and Australia. In recent years, Major Taylor has been rightfully celebrated by African American cycling clubs, a number of biographies, a corrective *New York Times* obituary, and even a Hennessy commercial.⁷² He was, however, not the only Black cyclist to challenge and beat the best white athletes. Joe Anderson was born in Jacksonville, Florida in 1876 and worked as a bicycle mechanic. By 1904, he was racing professionally for the Calumet Cycle Club in New York City and was considered the next big African American cycling talent. That year he intended to make a trip to Scotland to race the autumn season. While there is no information of

⁷⁰ Taylor’s parents had migrated north to Indianapolis from Kentucky during Reconstruction, see Balf, *Major*, 22-25.

⁷¹ “Scared the Major,” *Boston Evening Journal*, March 9, 1898, p. 5.

⁷² See Major Taylor Association, “Associated Clubs,” majortaylorassociation.org.

<http://www.majortaylorassociation.org/AssociatedClubs.shtml> (accessed January 15, 2020);

Ritchie, *Major Taylor*; Balf, *Major*; Randal C. Archibold, “1878-1932, Major Taylor,” *New York*

Times, January 31, 2019. [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/obituaries/major-taylor-](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/obituaries/major-taylor-overlooked.html)

[overlooked.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/obituaries/major-taylor-overlooked.html) (accessed January 15, 2020); and Jacob Meschke, “The Unsung Story of Major

Taylor Gets a Voice with Hennessy Cognac Campaign,” *Bicycling*, February 4, 2019.

<https://www.bicycling.com/news/a24116769/major-taylor-hennessy-campaign/> (accessed

January 15, 2020).

the trip, Anderson must have been somewhat successful. He made passport applications to visit Europe in 1907 and 1909, listing his occupation as “bicycle racer.” Anderson, however, would end up racing in the shadow of Taylor and the other Black cycling phenomenon of the day, Woody Headspeth.⁷³

Born at the start of the 1880s in Kentucky, Headspeth was “considered the fastest colored rider in the country, barring the ‘Major’” and got his start racing at the “colored fairs” in and around Kentucky.⁷⁴ In 1899, he made his northern debut racing white cyclists at Chicago’s

⁷³ O. E. Duncan, “Clever Southern Rider,” *The Freeman* (Indianapolis), August 6, 1904, p. 7; Joseph E Anderson, 1907; citing Passport Application, Florida, United States, source certificate #26438, Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925, 29, NARA microfilm publications M1490 and M1372 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed September 4, 2015. <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QV5Y-KMF6>; and Joseph E Anderson, 1909; citing Passport Application, Florida, United States, source certificate #76, Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925, 778, NARA microfilm publications M1490 and M1372 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), “United States Passport Applications, 1795-1925,” database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed October 13, 2015. <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QKDX-YG4F>.

⁷⁴ “Spokes from A Wheel,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, October 21, 1899, p. 2. There are conflicting dates and places for Headspeth’s birth. Both his marriage certificate and the 1900 census list him with a Kentucky birthplace. Headspeth’s passport application lists his place of birth as Indianapolis perhaps because his place of residence was there. In either case, Headspeth, like

Ravenswood track. His good placing led track officials to offer him a contract that paid his expenses and gave them exclusive track rights. Over the next two years, Headspeth would race, often alongside Major Taylor, against whites across the North and Midwest, making Indianapolis his home. By 1903, Headspeth was a fixture at the Madison Square Garden Six-Days.⁷⁵ At that year's December Six-Day, white newspapers reported with glee that Headspeth and his partner, Melvin Dove, a Black cyclist from New York, had retired from the race. White southerners were especially happy and perhaps relieved, given the racial ramifications, that southern cyclist Bobby

Taylor, had deep roots in Kentucky, see "Headspeth, Woody," *Notable Kentucky African Americans Database*, accessed September 19, 2018, <http://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/3040>; and "Woody Hedspeth, 1921; citing Passport Application, France," source certificate #57043, Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925, 1668, NARA microfilm publications M1490 and M1372 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,673,869. "United States Passport Applications, 1795-1925," database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed October 13, 2015, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QKDF-YCNN>

⁷⁵ "Professional Race," *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 8, 1899, p. 2; "Spokes from A Wheel," *ibid.*, October 21, 1899, p. 2; "Spokes from a Wheel," *ibid.*, April 14, 1900, p. 1; "Woody Headspeth's Victory," *The Freeman*, October 5, 1901, p. 7; "Headspeth A Star. Colored Rider Wins Five-Mile Ten-Mile Motor-Paced Bicycle Races," *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate*, September 4, 1902, p. 5; "Western Team in 6-Day Race," *Pawtucket Times*, December 2, 1902, p. 2; and "Six Day Riders, In Pitiabie Condition, Near Final Goal," *Trenton Times*, December 12, 1903, p. 1.

Walthour and his partner Benny Munro, also known as the “Dixie Flyers,” were crowned champions when “foreigners and colored men failed.”⁷⁶

Headspeth was likely exhausted as he had just returned from France. Earlier in 1903, Headspeth met Robert Coquelle, a Parisian bicycle race promoter, in New York City who convinced him to travel to Europe to race in the summer and autumn circuit. In May 1904, Headspeth signed another contract with Coquelle, and raced the next two-decades in Europe, making Paris his home [Figure 3]. Headspeth’s life on the Continent was not glamorous. In 1912, the *Salt Lake City Evening Telegram* mentioned Headspeth, noting that he recently won a small prize in Paris that would allow him to keep going. Just under a decade later at the age of 40, he applied for a passport to race in Switzerland. He told the American vice-consul in Paris that it had been “impossible” for him to return to the United States due to a lack of money. Woody Headspeth died in Lisbon, Portugal on April 21, 1941, having lived four decades in Europe and leaving behind a French wife and daughter.⁷⁷

For African Americans, bicycle racing was a test of Black mobility and ability in the industrial world. At stake were questions over whose bodies were suitable for industry. As the Black newspaper the *Washington Bee* put it in 1901, “Taylor was the central figure; Taylor was

⁷⁶ “Southern Men Won Great Race,” *Baltimore American*, December 13, 1903, p. 15; and “The Dixie Flyers in Long Race,” *Augusta Chronicle*, December 7, 1903, p. 1.

⁷⁷ “Headspeth, Woody,” *Notable Kentucky African Americans*. Coquelle would be Headspeth’s manager for the next seventeen years. Walter D. Bratz, “Sport Gossip,” *Salt Lake Evening Telegram*, June 15, 1912, p. 18; and “Woody Hedspeth, 1921; citing Passport Application, France.”

the man the people wanted to see. Taylor was the great Negro that the refined, the educated, and the Caucasian wanted to see.” By demonstrating his equal “powers” and “capabilities” on the bicycle, Taylor proved what “the Negro is able to do, can and will do” when given a chance.⁷⁸ After winning the 1899 World Championships in Montreal, Canada, Robert Coquelle wrote glowingly in the French outdoors magazine *Le Vie au grand air* that Taylor’s body was like a modern machine: his legs “beautifully fastened” and thighs “famous levers.”⁷⁹ Taylor seemed an almost perfect embodiment of what Joel Dinerstein has described as the machine aesthetics of the day: “power, speed, repetition, precision, efficiency, rhythmic flow.”⁸⁰

For some racial scientists, however, these machine aesthetics confirmed not Black cyclists’ equal abilities and civilization but rather suggested the suitability of African-descended people for exploitive industrial labor. In Bordeaux, Taylor was examined by a team of medical doctors who x-rayed and measured him according to the anthropometric method devised by the French criminologist Alphonse Bertillon. They concluded that Taylor was a “true masterpiece of human anatomy...[a] human sculpture: a living bronze,” but in their view his “cerebral inferiority [was] compensate[d] for by considerable superiority of the senses.” Here Taylor’s combination of physical strength and supposed sensuous race-traits meant that he was, according to the journalist and medical examiners, perfectly suited to the integration of human and machine that was the bicycle and therefore “disposed to manual labor.” At the same time, the article made clear French racial anxiety, concluding that Taylor was destined to beat the French

⁷⁸ “What Makes the Man?” *The Washington Bee*, August 24, 1901, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Robert Coquelle, “Le Sprinter Noir,” *Le Vie au grand air*, 14 Janvier 1900.

⁸⁰ Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 12.

champion, Jacquelin, the following week in Paris. On the curved banks of the Stade Vélodrome du Parc des Princes there would be “no room for any equivocation, no uncertainty as to the accuracy of the result, or the comparative value of the two men, of the two races,” noted *Le Vélo*. At stake were central questions over who could participate industrial civilization. In this instance, the audience of twenty-thousand French fans were so relieved by Jacquelin’s victory they stormed the track “mad” in their celebration.⁸¹ French anthropologists, such as Felix-Louis Regnault, had established human locomotion as a key indicator of racial difference. Black-powered bicycles challenged much of the orthodoxy of French racial knowledge rooted in ethnographic studies of the movement of African colonial subjects.⁸² In order for the French to accept Black sporting prowess, African Americans’ industrial success in the velodrome would need to be rationalized by their supposed un-civilization.

At the turn-of-the-twentieth century, African Americans’ engagement with machine aesthetics in art, sport, and culture became a central component of a transnational “New Negro” movement.⁸³ The achievements of Anderson, Headspeth, and Taylor were a direct assault on the day’s racial science, proving the “vital capacity” and industrial capabilities of African

⁸¹ Frantz Reichel, “Le Nègre,” *Le Velo* 14 mai 1901, in Vol. 5, Reel 1. Marshall W. “Major” Taylor Scrapbooks, 1897-1904, AIS.1984.07, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh [hereinafter MTS]; and Victor Beyer, “C’est Jacquelin!” *Le Velo* 17 mai, 1901; and “Jacquelin Emperor!” *L’Auto-Vélo* 17 mai 1901. MTS. Translation mine. See also, Balf, *Major*, 173-177.

⁸² See Brown, “Racialising the Virile Body,” 642; and Anne Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect*.

⁸³ On sport and the New Negro movement’s global footprint, see Baldwin and Makalani, eds., *Escape from New York*; and Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, 196.

Americans. At the same time, this very success was undermined by a reorganization of labor and race science to take into account African American achievements and rationalize the exploitation of Black bodies for industry prior to World War I. If in the middle of the nineteenth century John Henry matched but was ultimately destroyed by industrial technology, by the beginning of the twentieth Black cyclists were conquering white-machines and living to tell the tale.⁸⁴

Conclusion

Jim Crow shaped the meaning and experience of the bicycle just as the bicycle shaped the meanings and experiences of Jim Crow. In the close quarters of the train and streetcar, southern whites had by 1896 made segregation the law of the land. But what they could not stop was the spatial flexibility and countermobilities associated with the bicycle. Even before the boom, white southerners were concerned that cheaper bicycles could produce “a result not entirely anticipated,” African American cyclists.⁸⁵ At the height of its popularity, the bicycle could even seemingly upend the South’s carefully crafted and often violently policed racial hierarchy. In 1896, a Black wagon driver in Georgia “laughed mockingly” at a group of white cyclists before driving them off the road with his team of horses. The man was quickly arrested and brought before a white magistrate, who given the region’s racial dynamics surprisingly sided with the Black wagon driver and declared in wording echoed to this day: “I am against the cyclists every

⁸⁴ It may be in the velodrome where the industrial Black body was first contemplated by racial scientists. Paul Lawrie points later to World War I for this moment, see Lawrie, *Forging a Laboring Race*, 39-70.

⁸⁵ “Wheel Gossip,” *Wheel and Cycling*, September 19, 1890, p. 107.

time, and with the wagons. Cyclists are too fresh, and the roads were made for wagons, not cycles.”⁸⁶ Don Carlos Buell was right, the bicycle was a thorough leveler.

By the start of the twentieth century, the bicycle’s symbolic importance to American modernity was in sharp decline and replaced by the automobile as the new signifier of modern speed and mobility. In the South, the emergence of affordable bicycles and African American cyclists contributed to the decline in the bicycle’s real and symbolic popularity among the white middle class and elite. In 1900, the head of the almost moribund Tennessee Division of the LAW believed that the “principal cause of the deterioration of cycling in the State is owing to the reduction of cost of bicycles, thereby enabling the colored brother and sister to possess wheels, and as a result one can see in [Nashville] about ten times as many colored people riding as you do white people, and it is a rare sight at present to see a white woman riding a wheel.”⁸⁷ Unable to completely stop Black cyclists and faced with an object increasingly out of fashion, southern middle-class whites abandoned the bicycle alongside their northern peers. A belief in the whiteness of modern technological mobility foreclosed alternative transportation futures in a region dominated by the logic of Jim Crow.

A technology’s meaning comes from the society in which it is embedded. The bicycle was more than a cultural artifact of modernity. It was a utilitarian, sporting, and disruptive technology that white southerners worked to control. It was also a part of a global culture. In this regard, the southern experience of cycling in some ways resembled the imperial world as much as New York. At first, the British in India embraced the bicycle as a sign of their imperial

⁸⁶ “Georgia Jottings,” *Southern Cyclist* April 10, 1896. FHS.

⁸⁷ “Retail Conditions: Tennessee,” *Wheel and Cycling*, August 16, 1900, pp. 9-10.

modernity but quickly lost control of their monopoly. In India, as in the Jim Crow South, close “proximity to modern technology and technological aptitude served as a means of refashioning or reimagining entire communities,” observes David Arnold.⁸⁸ At the end of the nineteenth century, technology and whiteness were intimately linked. But as an everyday object and product of global mass culture, white southerners, like their British imperial counterparts, could only limit not prevent racialized “others” from acquiring the bicycle. Within this logic the ability to use industrial commodities, “opened the possibility that ‘others’ could in fact become white, with all the attendant anxieties that such a ‘shock of sameness’ might produce,” notes Mona Domosh.⁸⁹ As South Asians, Africans, and African Americans embraced the bicycle across the 1890s, British colonizers and white southerners abandoned it in favor of outdated technologies or the nascent and unreliable automobile.⁹⁰ Unlike in the colonial world, however, where bicycle use took on a utilitarian value for imperial subjects, the cost and dangers of cycling for African Americans combined with the decline of its bourgeois status meant there was not the same uptake after 1900.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Arnold, *Everyday Technology*, 42, 82-83, 93 (quote), 107. See also Morgan, *Cycling Cities*.

⁸⁹ Domosh, *American Commodities*, 4.

⁹⁰ On the South’s early embrace of automobility, see Hall, “Before NASCAR,” 629-688; and Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 5.

⁹¹ A declension narrative of African American cycling in the United States can be found when examining the southern Black press from 1891-1940. Mentions of “bicycle,” “cyclist,” and “cycling,” excluding adverts, roughly halved each decade after 1900. From 1891-1900 there were 217 mentions; 1901-1900, 83; 1911-1920, 45; 1921-1930, 11; and 1931-1940, 1. “African

This, of course, does not mean African Americans in the South stopped cycling rather the symbolic meaningfulness of the bicycle followed a similar, if delayed, pattern to white Americans. Moreover, the Great Migration after 1914 helps account for a decline in numbers. At the same time, southerners—white and Black—still made use of the bicycle for practical and recreational purposes. Noah Gumby, a bicycle shop owner in Pocomoke City, Maryland, was mentioned as an important member of his community in the 1916 edition of the *Centennial Encyclopedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Sociologist and anti-child labor activist Lewis Hines made extensive documentation of white bicycle messenger boys in the South's cities in the 1910s. While civil rights icon, Fred Shuttlesworth, commuted by bicycle for years to the Alpha Portland Cement Plant from his home in Birmingham, Alabama. The bicycle may have lost its shiny appeal, but as a “technology-in-use” it retained its significance in the daily lives of many southerners across the century.⁹²

American Newspapers, Series 1, 1827-1998,” *Readex: A Division of NewsBank*. Accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.readex.com/content/african-american-newspapers-series-1-1827-1998>. On British imperialists' abandonment of the bicycle see, Arnold and DeWald, “Cycles of Empowerment,” 972, 982. As early as 1895, the peak of the bicycle boom, Americans were already turning their attention to the possibilities of the automobile age, see Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*, 2-3.

⁹² More work on cycling in the 1920s and 1930s when African Americans were able to find meaningful and better paid work in the North is needed but is beyond the scope of this article. Richard R. Wright, ed., *Centennial Encyclopedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia, 1916), 101. Rare Book Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The adoption of the safety bicycle marks the South's participation in a diverse yet homogenizing global modernity based on high-tech consumer goods. A central component of global modernity at the end of the nineteenth century was the rapid acceleration of movement and efforts to control it by states and empires. The bicycle, a technological object that could be a utilitarian, leisure, or sporting device, came to embody the tension between modern personal mobilities and state control. For African American men and women of the middle and laboring class the bicycle was an opportunity to participate in modernity and assert their class status and aspirations, while embracing countermobilities at the local level that challenged an increasingly stringent Jim Crow. For African American professional cyclists, the bicycle offered an even more radical and accelerated mobility that took them outside the United States' racial regime, at the same time asserting the industrial abilities of African Americans. In the end, the bicycle reveals that far from exceptional, the South was a part of the global transformations, processes of mobility, and the racial politics of movement that occurred in places as diverse as New York, Boston, Shanghai, Johannesburg, and Delhi.

Available from *Documenting the American South*. Accessed July 12, 2018.

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/wright/wright.html>; Lewis Wickes Hine, photographer. *A typical Birmingham messenger*, October 1914. Photograph. Library of Congress. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018677706>; Shuttlesworth, Clifton. Interview by Andrew Manis. February 4, 1989, "Clifton Shuttlesworth Interview," p. 11. Transcript, 1437.1.19. Andrew M. Manis Oral History Interviews (Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Al.); and Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out*, 35-36. On significance of old technology still in use, see Edgerton, *Shock of the Old*, xi.



Figure 1. During the first bicycle boom aspiring African Americans made use of the bicycle to demonstrate their class-status as well as to challenge the limits placed on their mobility. In this undated photo, the young man’s sense of style clearly comes through, while the techno-modernity of the bicycle is made more vivid by the wooden house and staircase.

“Man on bicycle (on cloth),” MSS1218, Robert Langmuir African American Photograph Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.



Figure 2. Like their white counterparts, some middle-class African American women embraced cycling. In this posed photo of a young Atlanta woman, she proudly displays her bicycle as a symbol of her wealth. In doing so, she challenges not only a patriarchy that would limit women's cycling but the Jim Crow South's effort to restrict the movement of African Americans.

Kuhns (Atlanta, Ga.), "African American Woman with a Bicycle" (1895). Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 3. Woody Headspeth (R) rests in the infield of the Buffalo Velodrome, Paris alongside heavyweight boxer Sam McVea (L) and an unknown man. Bicycle racing gave African American men an opportunity to travel the world. Unlike success in boxing, which was often brushed aside by a belief in the supposed savage nature of Black men, the victories of Taylor and Headspeth challenged race science's belief in the industrial capabilities of African-descended people.

“Buffalo, [29 mai 1908] Sam Mac Vea, boxeur, Hedspath,” Agence Rol. Agence photographique. 29 Mai 1908. Department Estampes et photographie, EST EI-13 (11), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

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