

Book Review from David DuMond

*South to America*, A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation by Imani Perry

2022 HarperCollins. Kindle Edition

(All emphases herein are added.)

First, a few remarks from the author's forward, a fair warning. Do we agree with this assertion? I do.

*Race is at the heart of the South, and at the heart of the nation. Like the conquest of Indigenous people, the creation of racial slavery in the colonies was a gateway to habits and dispositions that ultimately became the commonplace ways of doing things in this country. They came to a head at the dawn of the Civil War, only to settle back into the old routines for a hundred years before reaching a fever pitch again before receding.*

*I was fascinated and sometimes furious at the sons of the Confederacy. I love my people without apology. My son Issa has warned me about the danger of making things look too beautiful. To be beautiful, it must be truthful. And the truth is often ugly. But it's funny, too. And strange. Also morbid. This is a collection, but it is also an excision, a pruning like we might do to a plant in order to extend its life. Most of all, please remember, while this book is not a history, it is a true story.*

Imani Perry has both a Ph.D and a law degree from Harvard University, so it is my impulse is to call her "Dr. Perry." But, Dr. Perry doesn't seem to use "Dr.," maybe because compared to me she is some kind of hip youngster. And maybe she follows the example of her elders.

Imani Perry is a professor of African American Studies at Princeton University. She has taught and published about a wide range of topics, including hip-hop, racial inequality, and police brutality.

The name Imani is of Arabic/Swahili origin, meaning "faith," and is not gender specific. I wondered if her parents named her, or if she named herself. Her mother, Dr. Theresa Perry, holds

degrees from Loyola (New Orleans), Marquette and Harvard universities, spent a lifetime writing, teaching, and organizing for Black student education, and was a co-author, with the late Asa Hilliard III and Claude Steele of *Young Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students*. So, with informed speculation, I imagined her mother named **Imani** Perry. (The source of a person's naming is good to know.) (It made me happy to see Dr. Hilliard's name. He was a teacher I tracked down to Georgia State University, to learn about ancient Egyptian religion.) I learned from the text of this book that Imani Perry's mother put that name on her.

For this book, Dr. Perry tasked herself to rove through the South, and report back. Some of these visits were direct, go there and see what's going on. Others were visits to her memory, reflections, sweet or sour. (Right away, I want to say this woman writes recursively, a manner which suits me very well, easy for me to read, smooth, always interesting. If this book reveals in any way the author's mind, then you would love Dr. Perry's mind. At least, I would.)

She begins in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, selected for geographical and historical reasons. It serves as a place to introduce us to Appalachia – a place and a concept – and it is the place where some Black Americans joined John Brown in a hare-brained scheme to start an armed rebellion by slaves for freedom. (Maybe the scheme worked, as the Harpers Ferry raid made the slaveocracy crazy enough to start the Civil War. And it was no more crazy than the 1916 Easter Rebellion in Ireland.)

Fear crept into her mind when Dr. Perry considered going to Harpers Ferry. As she put it,

*Many in the region haven't ever really accepted the loss of the Civil War, or perhaps more accurately, The South is on a recurring loop of cold Civil War battles that repeatedly bend towards the logic of the slavocracy. (Pp. 5-6.)*

The first historical name in this book is Shields Green, a Black man born into slavery in South Carolina, who for undisclosed reasons was called "Emperor of New York." Shields Green joined John Brown in the raid at the Harpers Ferry arsenal, and like John Brown, was captured and hanged. John Brown's body may have been put to moldering in the grave, but Shields Green's body was delivered to the Winchester medical college for disposition.

Dr. Perry wandered into a conversation with "Bob," a hard-core Confederate Civil War

reenactor. She knew something about reenactors from reading *Confederates in the Attic*, and conversing with its author Tony Horowitz. She had imagined to herself that she could never have a conversation with a Confederate. But she and Bob conversed easily for about an hour.

*A lot of art comes from rural places, even if that's not where it gets distributed, because it is fertile ground for the imagination. I think maybe reenactment should be described as a performance art, even if I am still uneasy about the pleasure it provides.*

This was one of the times that Dr. Perry expressed misgivings about her enjoyment of something, notwithstanding the dark history of repression behind it. Another such occasion happened in Kentucky, when a group of Black women professors took a break from their writing retreat to go on a bourbon distillery tour, which all enjoyed, even Dr. Imani Perry. Later, probably while writing this book, demon Guilt attacked.

*In retrospect, knowing what I know now, and reflecting on the sensory and social pleasure of that visit, I feel uncomfortable. Shouldn't we always be disturbed by such elegant surfaces, by the tendency to prune? Don't we always need to look round the back to see what made all this happen? Should I have reveled so easily in the bourgeois luxury?*

Reminds me of a verse from Percy French's Irish song, "The Mountains of Mourne:"

*I've seen England's king from the top of a bus  
And I've never known him, but he means to know us.  
And tho' by the Saxon we once were oppressed,  
Still I cheered, God forgive me, I cheered with the rest.*

Many of us, and by "us" I mean all us people, must endure for a period of time the task to honorably serve a corrupt master – person, business, or government. I view Confederate soldiers in light of that concept. So, memorials to the Confederate dead as such do not disturb me.

*KING HENRY . . . . Methinks I could not die anywhere  
so contented as in the King's company, his  
cause being just and his quarrel honorable.*

*WILLIAMS That's more than we know.*

*BATES Ay, or more than we should seek after, for we*

*know enough if we know we are the King's subjects.  
If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the  
King wipes the crime of it out of us.*

From Henry V, Act IV, Scene 1.

The problem is -- these memorials often celebrate the Lost Cause. And to that extent, I join Imani Perry in wishing their destruction, a cleansing of the punch bowl of public discourse.

There could be, and very occasionally has been, solidarity between Black and White working-class Americans. But, as W.E.B. DuBois put it, White workers fear losing the “Wages of Whiteness” should they join with Black workers.

*Poor and working-class White Americans were taught that if they expressed solidarity with Black people, also exploited, also laboring hard, they'd lose what Du Bois termed “the wages of whiteness,” those benefits that went along with not being at the bottom of the social hierarchy. It is well established that poor and working-class White people have hoped to gain something from Whiteness—and yet also have a complaint with the way it excludes them from all the status it promised. (p. 22).*

### **Family Values**

The South spawned the Moral Majority and other groups like it, highlighting what was termed Family Values.

*“Family values” was a catchphrase of the rise of the religious right. The way they did it was hypocritical at best. The veneration of the fetus and the degradation of the poor baby once born is cruel to the living and the dead. But there is something to be said about the what and how of the notion of family in the South. People say that family is important in this region. Family, I feel certain, is important everywhere. But the image that comes to mind with the word “family” varies. The Southern ideal of family is distinct from that of the Northeast, and a little word says why. In the Northeast, “we,” that two-letter word, provides an alchemy of domestic partnership. It is the word of the married couple, the unit of significance, the collaborative propertied venture. . . .*

*In the South you are more likely to hear “me ’n’”: Me ’n’ yo’ mama got to talking, and before you know it, we had talked all night. Me ’n’ Buck went down to Wingstop. “’N’em” is a companion orientation: Clara ’n’em lost they home in the storm. I’m going over by Johnny ’n’em’s party. The “me ’n’” and “’n’em” give you the flexibility of grouping. They specify, but you know that the intimate relations with parent, child, spouse, cousin elder, are many. This is the language of people who are used to thinking of family as a sprawl. . . .*

*As much as I like that, and think family is at best more than nuclear, the “me ’n’” isn’t necessarily something that is better or more humane. With the responsibility of a larger set of people to whom one is connected comes a way of being than can have you caught by the cruelest members of the sturdy culture of family.*

*With the responsibility of a larger set of people to whom one is connected comes a way of being than can have you caught by the cruelest members of the sturdy culture of family.*

*When one of the young men in the family (the Duggar family) was found to have abused his sisters and their friends, he went through a process of religious devotion after which the web remained the same. Those women are not alone in the expectation that they will endure for the sake of the larger unit. What, by analogy, happens to the family of the university, or the town, or the state, or the Old Dominion, or the nation itself, given what has been built into its creation? I am not answering the question, but I am confident it has to be asked. **And you ought to think hard about the answer.** (pp. 47-48)*

An Evangelist Lyft Driver

Imani Perry tells of a woman Lyft driver in Charlottesville, VA, who related her descent out of happily married prosperity into lonely poverty, who found Jesus and discovered she had the power to heal. Doctors didn’t believe in the Power of Jesus, which she exercised by sneaking into hospitals and ambushing patients with her healing power.

*The God of which she spoke, it struck me, was the God of masters. It was the God that dictated that it was righteous to slaughter the Indigenous and enslave the*

*heathens, and then later said that they could only come into his kingdom stripped of all of who they had been and supplicants to a Jesus with unlikely blue eyes and cascading blond hair, though born in Asia. It was the God of the settlers, whether Anglican, Presbyterian, or Baptist. . . .*

Arriving at her destination, this woman asked Imani Perry if they could pray together.

*And so, as usually is the case, I prayed against the cruel violence of dominion and diminishment. And armed with the belief in things unseen and miracles alike, I prayed she might be swayed to love the God of slaves. That God is far more tender than the one she praises, even to women like her. (pp. 50-52).*

### **Virginia Is for Lovers**

The actual name of this chapter was *From Princeton to Nashville*. Imani Perry starts off going to Princeton from her home in Philadelphia. The drive is northward, but she feels like she is moving into the South. Princeton University has a grim heritage of racism, featuring its early administrators, which included Jonathon Edwards. Found among his possessions was a paper, cut into four sections on which he wrote four sermons. The back of the paper was a bill of sale for a woman named Venus. “*A sermon on top of human trafficking.*”

Showing an appalling lack of public courtesy, the Princeton swim team recently presented itself dressed as tribal Africans.

Imani Perry drove into Virginia, thinking about the current tourist slogan, “Virginia is for Lovers.” I thought she might have expressed a few thoughts about the irony of the slogan, considering the case of Loving v. Virginia, a landmark decision in 1967 of the U.S. Supreme Court in which the Court ruled that laws banning interracial marriage violate the Equal Protection and Due Process Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. But, no. Maybe it was too close.

Our author has a lot to say about Virginia, mostly around a theme of the state’s original description of itself, “**Old Dominion.**”

### **A Race Man in Savannah**

Imani Perry explored the history and culture of the “Gullah Geechee” people, of the Sea Islands, off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina. These are believed to be descendants of

the Ibo tribe who developed a distinct culture.

Then on to Savannah, where she renewed acquaintance with Dr. Walter Evans, MD, a general surgeon in Detroit who retired to his hometown of Savannah. Dr. Evans lived his life as a race man, “. . . . that particular traditional African American orientation to life in which, whatever endeavor one pursues, the uplift of one’s people remains at the forefront.” (P. 264.) And in that capacity, with what limited means he had, he patronized Black artists, and has acquired an exquisite collection, and conducted salon meetings with poets, novelists, and performers at his home in Detroit. And he insisted that Imani Perry called him “Walter,” not Dr. Evans, his choice for all who came to see him.

Dr. Perry mused that the intimacy of among Blacks during the “before time,” the segregation period, engendered some benefits, now lost.

*One of the difficult side effects of desegregation—and you’ll hear it again and again from Black people who lived in the before time—is that something precious escaped through society’s opened doors. Even acknowledging how important desegregation was, the persistence of American racism alongside the loss of the tight-knit Black world does make one wonder. (pp. 265-266).*

### **Flannery O’Conner, Lost**

To my surprise, and to the surprise of many others, including Imani Perry, Flannery O’Connor was revealed a few years ago to be a virulent racist, Flannery O’Conner, the good Catholic girl, a writer sensitive to the most grotesque aspects of Southern life.

*The South is a monster of a place that one cannot help but at least partially revile. And everybody knows it, no matter how much they might glory in neo-Confederacy. The Janus face of Southern Whiteness—they know what they’ve done wrong, and they know you know; they hate you for it, and hate themselves for it, too—is strange. (p. 268)*

### **Florida**

I think our author was overwhelmed by Florida. Me too. She remarked on the endurance of the Seminole nation, including the Black Seminoles, riffed on both the fiction and the sociology of Zora Neal Thurston, the fantastical establishment of Disney world, the immigration

of the Cuban elite, followed by the lower caste Cubans, Haitians, and Puerto Ricans. But there is too much darkness: the murder of Trayvon Martin, and ultimately the slaughter at the Pulse.

*It was Latin Night at the Pulse nightclub. And there the would-be soldier sprayed bullets at the largely Puerto Rican Orlando crowd. Fifty died at his hands, and he did, too, from a bomb. It was easy for public opinion to attribute the massacre to his Afghan heritage and Islamism. It was harder to manage what seemed closer to the truth, that Omar Mateen was tortured by his own judgment against his attraction to men. But he didn't just turn that misery onto himself. Maybe all of the not-so-subtle messages about the violent hero, the king of the wild frontier, worked their way up into his insides, and he figured if he couldn't create himself as he'd imagined, he could destroy the sources of his torture: beautiful queer men. There isn't any safe place when the instruments of war are always within reach. They promise a fantasyland of power and action films, and underneath there is always wasted love. (p. 294).*

We read of reenactments of Seminole War battles, by which the Seminole Tribes lost territory and property, but remained unconquered, and ultimately won an economic victory.

*While the South lost the Civil War technically, White Southerners did not in fact lose the war substantively. After all, Jim Crow, convict labor, and lynching happened with near total impunity, and African Americans experienced decades of pernicious neglect from the federal courts and government. Exploitation ran amok. Inequality persists. And the nation turning a refusing eye, allowing the Southerners to work out their own business over the lives of Black people on the land of the Indigenous all across the region, gave the South their victory lap. (pp. 298-299).*

That is a dark rumination.

## **Alabama**

We lighten it up with a visit to Alabama, Imani Perry's home ground. She celebrates the hard-won elegance of Black women and children, men too, and marvels that Gordon Parks was able to capture the elegance, even in his photographs about Segregation.

## **New Orleans**



Dr. Perry calls herself a “cradle Catholic.” Which brings us to the city of New Orleans. Her parents met in New Orleans. Her mother Theresa Perry was then a novice in the Sisters of the Holy Family convent in New Orleans. Before taking her vows, Theresa Perry left the convent to join the Southern Civil Rights battles. So, Imani Perry says she owes her life to The Movement.

Charming though it may be, New Orleans offers a rich history of corruption, abuse and degradation, and Imani Perry describes this concoction in detail. Most horrible, you might know, was the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Until Katrina, Imani Perry visited the city almost every year. After Katrina, she did not return for more than ten years. COVID, with its quarantines, brought further misery. The New Orleans chapter concludes with a phone call with Sister Sylvia, at an elder care facility associated with the convent.

*When I called Sister Sylvia, during COVID quarantine, I learned she had become a resident of Lafon. Each person was sequestered in her room. As we spoke, she was cooking for two women from Belize in the room across the hall. She connected behind a closed door to people all over the building. And then she ministered to me. She told me not to blame God for this tragedy. Human doings could not be blamed on Him. His gift of grace was our refuge from them. Her voice has a natural vibrato, and so I felt it in my throat when she said that I must remember, that it was important to know that though I dwell here, this earthly cruel and sinful place is not my home. (p. 346.)*

### **Concluding Remarks**

Vernon Jordan hoped that we would measure a person by their stride, not their stumble. Almost every word in this book is about one or another of our stumbles, America lurching into the ditch on the promises of our founding documents. Why can't Imani Perry tell us about our strides?

Because. Stumbles keep happening. True, the police officer “. . . *Derek Chauvin, was tried and then convicted of his (George Floyd's) murder. Rare. Remarkable. Five other police killings became national news the same week. Unremarkable. Common.*” (p. 376.)

Maybe, advised by that great psychologist Bob Newhart, we could stop our racism in

America. Just stop it. Stop. It.

If that doesn't work, then what? We keep working at it.

Imani Perry leaves us with one little glimmer of possibility, if we think big enough:  
*"Greatness" is such an egotistical and dangerous word. But in the land of big dreams and bigger lies, we love greatness anyway. And if we want it, if we aren't afraid to grab it, we have to look South, to America.*

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Further reading suggestions:

Two novels by Louise Erdrich, a member of the Ojibwe tribe, feature an indigene view of America: *The Sentence* – Minneapolis, George Floyd, a haunted bookstore, Covid, and funny; *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Catholic gender-bending. And speaking of gender-bending, *The Ballad of Perilous Graves*, by Alex Jennings, the Katrina devastation as told in speculative fiction. On John Brown, *The Good Lord Bird*, by James McBride. Also on John Brown, *Cloudsplitter*, by Russell Banks, one of my candidates for the Great American Novel.

Some suggestions from Professor Imani Perry:

<https://www.princeton.edu/news/2022/02/04/imani-perrys-selections-black-history-month-plus-university-events-and-resources>

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