

When the Stars begins to fall.
**Exoticism, Aesthetic Blues and Representations of Singing
in the American South**

*Gianpaolo Chiriaco**

Abstract. Between 1800 and 1863 - the years of the Emancipation Proclamation - many travellers from Europe or the North of the United States visited the Southern States and provided particular descriptions of the socio-geographic of that land. Many of their stories included descriptions of musical practices - and in particular singing performances - of Afro American slaves. The trips continued long after the end of the civil war, although in different forms. A philanthropic endeavour seemed to be the main driver for such explorers, whose reports often included pictures that visually supported the descriptions of the musical performances observed.

*The aim of this contribute is to analyze the relationship between literary descriptions and visual images that describe African-American vocal performances during slavery. What emerges is a conflation of exotic sentiments towards musical practices, memories of sonic landscapes, and a somewhat nostalgic imagination. Then, the focus will be on the ex-slave narratives and how they have constructed a memory and an imagination later defined as blues aesthetic. In conclusion, extracts from the exhibition *When the Stars Begin to Fall* (Stadium Museum, Harlem, 2014) will be discussed in order to prove that the dialectic between exoticism and blues aesthetic is still active in the representations of the South of Uniterd States that move between sonic memories and imagination.*

Riassunto. *Tra il 1800 e il 1863 – anno in cui Lincoln proclamò l’Emancipazione – molti viaggiatori europei o provenienti dagli stati del Nord si avventurarono nel Sud degli Stati Uniti fornendo descrizioni particolareggiate di quella realtà sociale e geografica. Molti dei loro racconti contenevano descrizioni di pratiche musicali – e in particolare di canti – di afroamericani costretti in schiavitù. I viaggi continuarono anche dopo la fine della guerra civile e per tutto l’Ottocento, sebbene in forme differenti. Una spinta filantropica emerge come il motore principale di tali esplorazioni, i cui resoconti consegnati alle stampe possedevano spesso un apparato iconografico che supportava visivamente le descrizioni delle performances vocali osservate da questi viaggiatori.*

Questo contributo ha lo scopo di analizzare il rapporto tra descrizioni letterarie e visuali delle performances musicali di afroamericani in schiavitù. Ne emerge un quadro articolato in cui si fondono l’esotizzazione delle pratiche musicali, le memorie di paesaggi sonori, e un’immaginazione ontrisa di nostalgia.

Successivamente, concentrerò l'attenzione sulle ex-slave narratives e su come esse abbiano costruito una memoria e un'immaginazione che è stata poi definita come "estetica blues". Infine, userò alcuni estratti della mostra When the Stars Begin to Fall (Stadium Museum, Harlem, 2014) per dimostrare come la dialettica fra esotismo ed estetica blues è ancora attiva in quelle rappresentazioni del Sud degli Stati Uniti che si muovono fra memorie sonore e immaginazione.

In 1823, William Faux, travelling through the United States of America, described a scene that can be considered as a trope of 19th century America. The few lines conflate the movement of people, the poor parade of small and rural communities, the continuous search of profitable businesses, the American dream, and the exploitation of black slaves: «I met and passed five or six huge wagons laden with goods, chattels, and children, and families, attended by horsemen, cattle, and footmen, and many negroes, all returning from the Missouri territory to their native home and state of Kentucky, which they had rashly left only two months since»¹.

The fact that Faux highlights the presence of “negroes” in the caravan exemplifies the interest of travellers toward the presence of people of African origins in the United States as the most visible facet of the “peculiar institution”, as slavery was called at that time. The interest in many cases was moved by a particular kind of philanthropism, but the descriptions provided in the chronicles often include economic and political evaluations of the effects of slavery, as well as reflections on the social milieu. Moreover, the descriptions quite often reflect the political position of the writers.

In a mixture of enchantment and paternalism, several encounters with black slaves also include descriptions of singing moments, like the one observed by William Cullen Bryant²:

The light-wood fire was made, and the negroes dropped in from the neighboring plantations, singing as they came. The driver of the plantation, a colored man, brought out baskets of corn in the husk, and piled it in a heap; and the negroes began to strip the husks from the ears, singing with great glee as they worked, keeping time to the music, and now and then throwing in a joke and an extravagant burst of laughter. The songs were generally of a comic character; but one of them was set to a singularly wild and plaintive air, which some of our musicians would do well to reduce to notation.

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the relationship between literary descriptions and visual images that describe African-American vocal performances during slavery. What emerges is a conflation of exotic sentiments towards musical practices, the memory of sonic landscapes, and a somewhat nostalgic imagination.

* Libera Università di Bolzano, www.rotvosciame.com

¹ W. FAUX, *Memorable Days in America*, London, Simpkin and Marshall, 1823, p. 205.

² W. CULLEN BRYANT, *Letters of a Traveller*, New York, Putnam, 1850, p. 84.

Then, the focus will be on the ex-slave narratives and how they have constructed a memory and an imagination later defined as blues aesthetic. In conclusion, extracts from the exhibition *When the Stars Begin to Fall* (Stadium Museum, Harlem, 2014) will be discussed in order to prove that the dialectic between exoticism and blues aesthetic is still active in the representations of the South of the United States that move between sonic memories and imagination.

Significance of Black singing

Images of caravans moving southbound in the United States assume a more dramatic tinge when they depict the so called coffle, that is a line of chained slaves, accompanied by armed supervisors and walking toward the destination where they will become forced workers. In an image archived at the Library of Congress³, the coffle is symbolically passing by the United States Capitol, in Washington D.C. [Fig. 1]



Fig. 1. A slave-coffle passing the Capitol round 1815. Print, published between 1876 and 1881. Library of Congress Washington, LC-USZ62-2574.

Although no musical instruments are depicted, the picture has a quite definite rhythmical pace, as the slow, dramatic movement of the group of people suggests a coordinated, solemn and sonorous march. Giving the apparent similarities, the image could have inspired movie director Steve McQueen in his cinematic rendition of *12*

³ LC-USZ62-2574.

Years a Slave. In one scene of the movie we see the coffle of slaves, who have been sold in Washington but are supposed to arrive in Louisiana, walking the street of the city, under the familiar shade of the Capitol. It is interesting to note, with regards to the argument that I am exposing in this chapter, that the movie made also extensive use of the imagination related to the role of (individual and collective) singing in black culture and its relation to the slave communities⁴.

Another image archived at the Library of Congress⁵ shows an additional element: the coffle is accompanied by two fiddlers, who are leading the line, right behind the horse of the overseer, playing for the caravan in order to sustain the march in the dark of the night. It is difficult to say whether or not some of the slaves in the portrait are singing, but certainly the presence of slave musicians here signifies the role of music in fulfilling the expectations of white people. The black slaves are expected to play and sing, even in the difficult march with chained feet: their ability to do so enhances their value in the auctions to which the coffle is directed, as underlined by Katrina Dyonne Thompson⁶.

Music played to entertain an interracial audience, meanwhile gaining some strategic advantage within the power relation of the plantation, is the center of the ritual (already described by Bryant) of corn-shucking. At the same time, the event of corn-shucking also represented a fundamental opportunity to strengthen relationships among black communities beyond the usual limits, as slaves from different plantations were exceptionally allowed to gather for the frolic. There are many illustrations that represent corn-shucking. For the most part they show athletic gestures and body contortions of dancers; but also central in the depiction is the singing of specific, and sometimes improvised, lines. A feature that is also represented in many cases is a black man on the top of the shuck pile, singing, leading and inciting his fellows during the ritual⁷.

Cabell Chenault, later a judge in Virginia, kept a diary of his younger years in Kentucky during the war. The voice of a black slave became one of his strongest memories. His name was Pike, and – according to the story told by Chenault – he performed a call from a distance, while going with his companions to a corn-shucking. People waiting at the party location for the arrival of all the slaves from near-by plantations could recognize his voice, «that sounded in the distance like the clarion notes of wild gees... clear, distinct tenor that leaped and bounded far above any other singers. It was simply charming, entrancing»⁸.

⁴ See G. CHIRIACÒ, *Singing a Life in Bondage: Black Vocality and Subjectivity in '12 Years a Slave'*, in M. EVANS, D. HUGHES, *Singing Voice in Contemporary Cinema*, Sheffield, Equinox, 2016.

⁵ LC-USZ62-30798.

⁶ K.D. THOMPSON, *Ring Shout Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery*, Chicago-Urbana-Springfield, University of Illinois Press, 2014, p. 139.

⁷ See R. D. ABRAHAM, *Singing the Master. The Emergence of African-American Culture in the Plantation South*, New York, Penguin, 1992.

⁸ J. CABELL CHENAULT, *Old Cane Spring. A Story of the War between the States in Madison County, Kentucky*, Louisville, Standard, 1937, p. 45.

Calls in the fields, also known as field hollers, represent a strong memory of vocal expressions from black slaves that occupy many books of travellers and diaries alike. Of all the accounts, the most famous is probably the one from Frederick Law Olmsted. The person who would become the famous landscape architect who designed Central Park in New York and supervised the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago published in 1856 his *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*. In this famous passage, he created the model of what has been considered the typical black hollering:

I strolled off until I reached an opening in the woods, in which was a cotton-field and some negro-cabins, and beyond it large girdled trees, among which were two negroes with dogs, barking, yelping, hacking, shouting, and whistling, after 'coons and 'possums. Returning to the rail-road, I found a comfortable, warm passenger-car, and, wrapped in my blanket, went to sleep. At midnight I was awakened by loud laughter, and, looking out, saw that the loading gang of negroes had made a fire, and were enjoying a right merry repast. Suddenly, one raised such a sound as I never heard before; a long, loud, musical shout, rising, and falling, and breaking into falsetto, his voice ringing through the woods in the clear, frosty night air, like a bugle-call. As he finished, the melody was caught up by another, and then, another, and then, by several in chorus. When there was silence again, one of them cried out, as if bursting with amusement: "Did yer see de dog?--when I began eohing, he turn roun' an' look me straight into der face; ha! ha! ha!" and the whole party broke into the loudest peals of laughter, as if it was the very best joke they had ever heard⁹.

Unfortunately, Olmsted's recollection does not provide any visual description that could accompany such vivid sonic memory. The book however provides images of field hands of black complexion overseen by a horsed white man with his whip¹⁰. The focus on the exploitation of forced labor is typical of the view of a Northern intellectual abolitionist, in a period of time that precedes the explosion of Civil War. The trip to the American South, for such travelers, was a means to denounce atrocities, violence, and the inequalities of the slave system. [Fig. 2] Nevertheless, the presence of textual and visual descriptions of black singing remains relevant and meaningful.

Freedom was a singsong

I want to turn the attention now on a different kind of travelers in the American South. During the second half of 19th Century, many books of memoirs of the American South have been published. These memoirs often present descriptions of black slaves singing as reminiscences of entrancing sonic experiences.

⁹ F.L. OLMSTED, *The Slave States*, New York, Capricorn, 1959 (or. ed. 1856), p. 114; J. CABELL CHENAULT, *Old Cane Spring. A Story of the War between the States in Madison County, Kentucky*, Louisville, Standard, 1937, p. 45.

¹⁰ F.L. OLMSTED, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, New York, Sampson Low, Son & Co, p. 387.



Fig. 2. Slaves working in the fields. F. L. Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, New York, Sampson Low, Son & Co, p. 387.

Mary A. Livermore presents a description of *Ole Virginia* in which the moment of singing is particularly powerful. She is going back to the main house with the master's son, to whom she is teaching. She is on a wagon during the last hour of the day, and while they proceed through the plantation lands, a number of slaves gather behind the vehicle. They sing as the working day turns to its end. The longer they drive, the more people join the choir. The scene – as well as the beauty of the singing – is somehow exceptional, therefore the child decides to ask permission to his father, the master, to bring the procession to the entrance of the house, an area where the gatherings of slaves were usually forbidden. Here are Livermore's words:

The glamour of the dying day, which overshot the sky with a tender saffron and pink, and tinted the east with a delicate purple; the minor melody of the negro voices, a hundred or more, blending in one swelling strain, which rose and fell in measured cadences; the weary, worn, black faces of the older servants, intermingled with those of the younger mulattoes and octaroons; the blonde and brunette beauty of the white children, over whom presided the regal figure of Aunt Aggy; the waving branches of glistening holly relieved by the scarlet berries; the constantly increasing numbers of black men and women going home from their work, who joined themselves to our picturesque procession, and added their voices to the chorus, - all these combined made so unusual scene that I seemed to be wholly separated from the world into which I had been born and reared, and to be translated to another planet¹¹.

¹¹ M.A. LIVERMORE, *The Story of My Life or The Sunshine and Shadow of Seventy Year*, Hartford, Worthington and Co., 1897, p. 184.

The book offers also a picture of the scene, that later became very popular as a description of choral singing in a slave context¹². The image portrays a black man with a hat at the forefront, as though he is leading the choir. The crowd is clapping with hands in different positions: some are holding them toward the ground; some are raising them over their heads. They look in all directions, a detail that gives the whole scene a particular strength: on the one hand, picturing the black men facing all around gives a visual image of the ability of the chant to fill the space of the landscape; on the other hand it is a detail that gives the scene a component of freedom, as though the singers can overcome their subaltern condition in the very moment in which they sing. [Fig. 3]

The image, therefore, clarifies the perspective of the writer in a more direct fashion than her words do, as Livermore, despite the fact that she was working in the plantation, expresses feelings of sympathy towards the slaves.

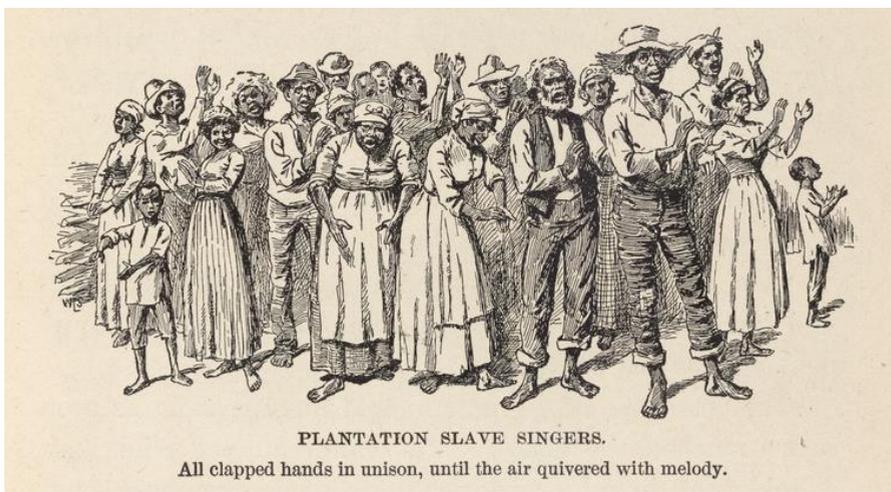


Fig. 3. A black man with a hat at the forefront of a crowd clapping with hands in different positions. From M. A. Livermore, *The Story of My Life or The Sunshine and Shadow of Seventy Year*, Hartford, Worthington and Co., 1897, p. 185

In an account from Little Rock, Arkansas, the former slaver Robert Farmer recounted the moment of his childhood in which his community received the information that the Emancipation Proclamation had made them free. He states: “Freedom was a singsong every which way I knew anything”¹³. Although from a different perspective, Farmer’s memoir resonates with the image from Livermore’s book. They both present the sound of people singing coming from every direction as a symbol of freedom: freedom as a hope in the case of the slaves behind the

¹² ID., p. 185.

¹³ G.P. RAWICK, ed. by, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, series 2, vol. 8, Greenwood, Westport, 1972, p. 271.

carriage in which Livermore travels; freedom as the beginning of a new era in the case of Farmer's narrative.

The ex slave narratives are a section of the Federal Writers Project, one of the New Deal experiments to provide jobs to Americans through federal intervention. The FWP was more specifically directed to intellectuals and to those people that today would be defined as cultural operators. Organized in state groups, and coordinated by the federal office in Washington, where also a young Alan Lomax worked for some time, the project collected more than 3.500 interviews of elder African Americans who were born under the social conditions of slavery. This is not the right place for an examination of the important results and the heavy limits of such a huge collection, but it can be worthy to recall Dena Epstein's words. The late musicologist in 1977 lamented that «manuscript sources, of which the Slave Narrative Collection assembled by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930's is a prime example, also remain virtually untapped»¹⁴. Even though there have been a few historical studies in the last couple of decades that used the slave narratives as a musicological source – a good example being the work of White and White¹⁵ – there is still a lot more to explore.

Within the framework of this contribute, it is interesting to note that the Federal Writers Project, notwithstanding its ethnographic ethos, reproduced the scheme of white travelers looking for African-American exoticism, whether they “travel” to predominantly black suburbs of the main Southern cities or they search for the stereotypical black granny. However, the FWP was a relevant project as it attempted to give to African-Americans in the South a space in which they could express their own opinion, reply to specific questions related to their personal and collective history, recollect their historic experience. This is not to say that the interviews are objective documents, as they reflect personal memories from the childhood of the interviewees, and they are, of course, also significantly influenced by the interviewer's perspective, racial background, social origins and economic status. Nevertheless, for the specific interest of this essay, the ex-slave narratives remain an incredibly rich source for the detailed descriptions of singing practices they provide.

Unfortunately, the visual contributions of the FWP are not particularly relevant, therefore it is somehow difficult to compare the interviews, and in particular the descriptions of singing moments, with their visual counterpart. The research project *Rotvosciame*, in the attempt to insert these descriptions in a bigger visual frame, developed a map of such descriptions¹⁶. A map archived at the New York Public Library, dated 1863, the same year of the Emancipation Proclamation, has been used and re-arranged with the voices of the ex-slaves. [Fig. 4]

¹⁴ D. EPSTEIN, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals. Black Folk Music to the Civil War*, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1977, p. 190.

¹⁵ S. WHITE, G. WHITE, *The Sounds of Slavery. Discovering African-American History Through Songs, Sermons, and Speech*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2005.

¹⁶ <http://www.afrovocality.com/voice-map/>

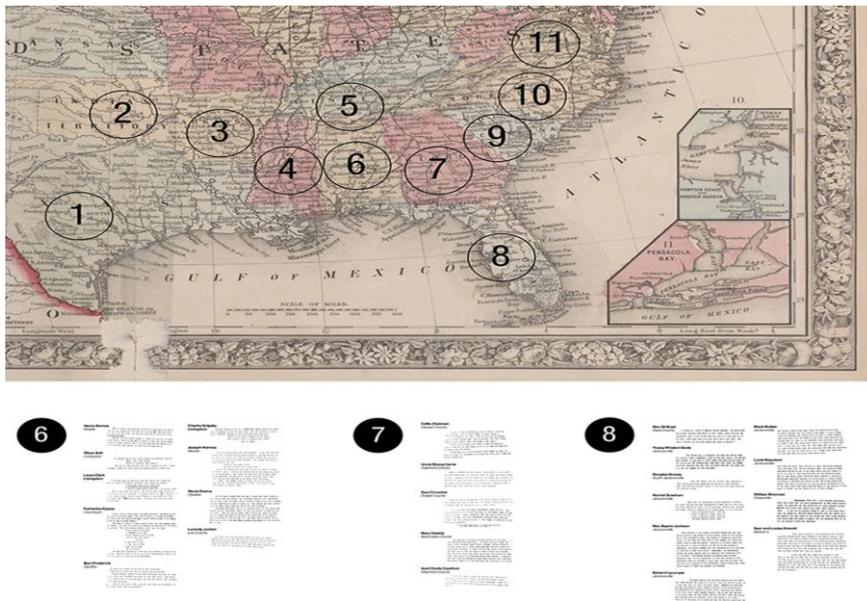


Fig. 4. A map archived at the New York Public Library, dated 1863, has been used and re-arranged with the voices of the ex-slaves. <http://www.afrovocality.com/voice-map/>

The aim was to highlight the role played by memories and images of African-American vocal traditions in the construction of the nation. As Philip Bohlman affirms:

That a map is a construction, of course, and not a form of reality goes without saying. The roads and borderlines of the map are mere inscriptions, so approximate as to rely on a considerable degree of imagination. The inscription of imagination on a map, I wish to suggest, is akin to the notations of music and the inscription of music through notation. Our experience of music, then, requires that we imagine the relation between the sonic experience of the present and the ways in which those of the past have been mapped¹⁷.

Aesthetic Blues and Exoticism

But how do these images from different travelers, and from different geographical places and historical moments, work in the creation of a vocal imagination of black traditions? And how do the vocal traditions, constructed through the contributions of these travelers, play a role in contemporary African-

¹⁷ P.V. BOHLMAN, *The Remembrance of the Past: Music, Race, and the End of History in Modern Europe*, in R. RADANO, P.V. BOHLMAN, ed. by, *Music and the Racial Imagination*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000.

American visual art? I will borrow the idea of blues aesthetic as an additional element that operates, here, together with exoticism and racial imagination, in the characterization of the sources I have been dealing with so far. Blues Aesthetic is a notion created by art historian Richard Powell, who tried to explore the concept of site of memory to analyze African-American visual culture from its origins. The notion of blues aesthetic, then, considers the presence of evocations – sometimes also stylized – of aspects of the African past and the black tradition of blues. The tonal and rhythmic games, considered by Powell as fundamental elements of the blues, are seen as symbols of a common tradition and of a cultural resistance that return in any typology of black artistic communication¹⁸.

The exhibition ‘When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South’, held at the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY, in 2014, can help us to reply to the previous questions and to explore the qualities of such aesthetic blues. The imagination of the black artists, quoted in the title, is nurtured by songs, voice and singing moments. Not only the exhibition took the name from a spiritual, but also the power of singing to re-establish a sense of memory is well described through the work of Theaster Gates, Kara Walker and others. A good example of how singing, remembrance and tradition intersect with the exploitation of slavery and the necessity to overcome the memory of the past, is exemplified in the video work of Rodney McMillan, *A Song for Nat*. The memory of the violent rebellion led by the preacher Nat Turner in 1831 is reactivated by the images of a black male body in a forest, approaching the big house built close to the wood. The video therefore plays on the media-representation of African Americans, and particularly African-American men, as dangerous and potentially rebellious. McMillan reminds us that contemporary representations and media-inspired narratives are still connected to the fear instilled by Turner’s rebellion in 1831, just like the vocal imagination and the black singing traditions are still rooted in a similar history.

As Thomas Lax affirms, «No place has played a more contradictory role in the fantasy of African-American origins than the American South. At once a homeland and place of exile, the South is a cipher for a culture understood as obstinately regional and global, determinedly historic and contemporary. It is, of course, a place with real-world implications. Yet its geography is also elastic, and it is constructed as a space of real and symbolic contestation»¹⁹. As Malcom X provocatively stated, somehow for African-Americans – although not for their own choice – the South begins underneath the Canadian border. This is a synthesis that takes us to the idea that in the cultural paths and processes in which the music plays a fundamental role, therefore also in the blues aesthetic, racial imagination and the formation and transmission of cultural values are intertwined.

¹⁸ R.J. POWELL, *Art history and Black Memory: Toward a “Blues Aesthetic”*, in G. FABRE, R. O’MEALLY, ed. by, *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 228-243.

¹⁹ T. LAX, *In Search of Black Space*, in T. LAX, ed. by, *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and American South*, New York, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2014, p. 13.

If we consider the work of contemporary artists in relation to African-American past together with a contemporary scenario in which social inequalities based on race continue to emerge, we can see how the American South and the scenes of black singing described by travellers in the 19th Century still nurture the present imagination of a geographical area. Scott Romine asserts that

«South retains force in different scenarios, as a test of authenticity – necessitates something like a study of comparative atavisms framed, on one hand, by a recognition that the production of coherence and tradition often constitutes the work of culture, and on the other, by an awareness that such coherence is inherently unstable and subject to innovation. So imagined, the flexible South – subject to multiple uses in multiple projects of culture – may prove more durable than the solid South ever was»²⁰.

In conclusion, chronicles and diaries of travellers often assisted in building differences based on the “us and them” dualism. This essay tried to elaborate on the idea that, notwithstanding the exoticism of some of these chronicles, the ideas that travellers’ accounts carried in relation to vocal practices of African Americans still influence the contemporary imagination and what has been defined as aesthetic blues, as well as the products of this aesthetic, like the ones exhibited at the Studio Museum. In the case of the American South, therefore, to borrow from Thomas Lax’s words, it is important to consider that representations like the one presented here must always be considered as the product of elastic geographies that travellers of different kinds and belonging to different times helped to construct.

²⁰ S. ROMINE, *The Real South*, in ID., p. 120.

