

Participatory Readership  
Reconstructing the Historical Subscribership of South Today  
Lectorat participatif  
Une reconstruction du lectorat historique de la petite revue  
South Today

Megan Butchart

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Article abstract

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# Participatory Readership: Reconstructing the Historical Subscribership of *South Today*

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## *Abstract*

Despite the emerging proliferation of periodical studies scholarship attentive to various facets of the publishing circuit, relatively little is known about the readers of historical periodicals. Who were they? How were they reading? Why were they reading? How did readers participate in the work of periodicals discursively and non-discursively? This article outlines the process of reconstructing, from archival subscription records, the historical subscribership of *South Today*, a “little” literary magazine and activist publication published in the American South in the 1930s and 1940s by editors Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling. Combining the findings of this data with reader testimony in the magazine and archive, I consider the difference between “imagined” and “real” readerships and investigate how Smith and Snelling’s curation of readerly community spaces—and the resultant reader participation both on and off the page—contributed to the magazine’s development and community-based political activism. Although *South Today* has fallen somewhat into obscurity, it had a relatively large circulation and long run for a little magazine, and it serves as an insightful publication in the history of the long civil rights movement. Furthermore, its community approach to publishing and openly anti-segregationist politics make it an interesting candidate for a study of readership, for as *South Today* was increasingly subjected to state surveillance, reading the magazine became more and more of a political

act.<sup>1</sup> This article contributes not only to studies of little magazines and their readerships generally, but also proposes that understanding *South Today*'s politics and historical significance necessitates a study of its approach to readership. Ultimately, this article offers evidence of *South Today*'s readers as active participants rather than passive consumers, and argues that these peripheries around print objects are important sites of community and activism that deserve greater attention.

### Résumé

Malgré la prolifération émergente de recherches sur les périodiques attentives aux différents aspects du circuit de publication, les lecteur·trice·s de périodiques historiques sont toujours relativement peu connu·e·s. Qui étaient-ils·elles? Comment lisaient-ils·elles? Pourquoi lisaient-ils·elles? Comment participaient-ils·elles au travail des périodiques, aux sens discursif et non discursif? Cet article présente, à l'aide de dossiers d'abonnement archivistiques, une reconstruction du lectorat de la petite revue littéraire *South Today*, publication militante diffusée au Sud des États-Unis dans les années 1930 et 1940 par les éditrices Lillian Smith et Paula Snelling. En unissant les conclusions de ces données aux témoignages de lecteur·trice·s figurant dans *South Today* et dans les archives, je présente une analyse des différences entre les lectorats « imaginés » et « réels ». J'examine également les effets de la conservation d'espaces communautaires littéraires par Smith et Snelling — et, par conséquent, la participation des lecteur·trice·s aux sens « sur page » et « hors page » — sur le développement et le militantisme politique de la revue. Bien que *South Today* soit tombée dans l'oubli, elle a profité d'une grande circulation et d'un long tirage en dépit de son statut de petite revue, et elle demeure une publication révélatrice dans le contexte de l'histoire du mouvement des droits civiques. Par ailleurs, en raison de son approche

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<sup>1</sup> Will Brantley, "The Surveillance of Georgia Writer and Civil Rights Activist Lillian Smith: Another Story from the Federal Bureau of Investigation," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2001): 59–82.

communautaire envers la publication et ses sensibilités politiques ouvertement antiségrégationnistes, la revue *South Today* est une candidate intéressante pour une étude de lectorat, surtout parce que sa publication était de plus en plus soumise à la surveillance de l'État, et par conséquent, sa lecture devenait de plus en plus un acte politique avec le temps.<sup>2</sup> Cette recherche vise non seulement à contribuer aux études de petites revues et de leurs lectorats, mais propose également qu'une réelle compréhension des sensibilités politiques et de l'importance historique de *South Today* nécessite une étude de son approche envers son lectorat. En conclusion, cet article démontre que les lecteur·trice·s de *South Today* étaient des participant·e·s actif·ve·s plutôt que des consommateur·trice·s passif·ve·s, et affirme également que ces périphéries autour d'objets imprimés constituent des sites importants de communauté et de militantisme qui méritent une plus grande attention.

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Between 1936 and 1945, white Southern writer and activist Lillian Smith and her lifelong partner Paula Snelling co-edited an interracial little magazine called *South Today*.<sup>3</sup> The magazine was published quarterly and later semi-annually between 1936 and 1945 from the couple's home, just outside of Clayton, Georgia. With an annual subscription cost of \$1, the magazine grew from twelve to as many as 126 pages. At its height, *South Today* sold at least 5,000 copies per issue, with its pamphlet literature sometimes selling in the tens to hundreds of thousands.

Initially founded as a Southern literary journal committed to challenging the "sterile fetishism of the Old South"<sup>4</sup>—as exemplified by groups like

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<sup>2</sup> Will Brantley, "The Surveillance of Georgia Writer and Civil Rights Activist Lillian Smith: Another Story from the Federal Bureau of Investigation," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2001): 59–82.

<sup>3</sup> The complete run of the magazine has been digitized by Piedmont University and is available through their website. The magazine had three iterations: *Pseudopodia* (1936), *The North Georgia Review* (1937–1941), and *South Today* (1942–1945); however, in this article I will refer to the magazine in its entirety as *South Today*.

<sup>4</sup> Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling, "Editorial," *Pseudopodia* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1936): 6.

the Southern Agrarians and popular novels such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936)—*South Today* grew increasingly outspoken against interconnected systems of racial, economic, and imperialist oppression, with the focus of the magazine broadening to include sociological, psychoanalytical, and economic analyses. As Margaret Rose Gladney puts it, “[Smith] refused to separate the seemingly conflicting roles of artist and activist”<sup>5</sup>; this statement also aptly describes the dual concerns of *South Today*, which merged the creation and promotion of anti-racist Southern literature with movements for social and racial justice in the Jim Crow South. “Off-the-page,” this manifested in mutual aid organizing for the establishment of a free and desegregated rural library, school lunch program, and maternity centre.<sup>6</sup> “On-the-page,” this was enacted by writing and reviewing counter-canonical Southern literature, publishing an interracial contributorship, and creating accessible, participatory community spaces for readers.<sup>7</sup>

The editing and publishing of *South Today* marked a turning point in the lives and careers of Smith and Snelling, who were deeply involved in all aspects of the magazine and, indeed, were collectively the magazine's most frequent contributors.<sup>8</sup> Smith and Snelling were both born into white middle-class Southern families and received post-secondary educations; perhaps in part due to their experiences as queer women in the heteronormative South, as well as other contributing experiences such as Smith's witnessing of British colonialism in China, both began to

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret Rose Gladney, *How Am I to be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith*, ed. Margaret Rose Gladney (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Rabun County Historical Society, “Lillian Smith: Activist and Neighbor,” *The Vintage Rabun Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (September 2015), [rabunhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2015-Sept-Vintage-Rabun.pdf](http://rabunhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2015-Sept-Vintage-Rabun.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Jordan J. Dominy, “Reviewing the South: Competing Canons in *South Today* and the Kenyon Review,” *Southern Literature, Cold War Culture, and the Making of Modern America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 3–28.

<sup>8</sup> Smith and Snelling collectively contributed just under 50% of the content throughout *South Today*'s run—an uncommon occurrence within periodicals, and one which speaks to the extent of their vision and control of the publication as well as the challenges they often encountered in finding writers to contribute without monetary compensation. See Megan Butchart, “The Literary Activism of Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling's Little Magazine *South Today*,” Thesis (University of Alberta, 2022), 115, [doi.org/10.7939/r3-y6sh-5s54](https://doi.org/10.7939/r3-y6sh-5s54).

interrogate the systems of segregation operative in their own society.<sup>9</sup> While running the Laurel Falls Girls Camp, Smith and Snelling started *South Today* as a creative and intellectual outlet to develop their literary skills and build a literary community in rural Georgia. Publishing *South Today* would prove a formative project for both Smith and Snelling; not only did the magazine help them develop as writers, but it connected them to a larger network of activists that would guide the direction of their future work. The importance of *South Today* is particularly evident in the more public-facing of the two editors, Lillian Smith, who would go on to become a well-known writer, speaker, and civil rights activist, publishing works including *Strange Fruit* (1944), *Killers of the Dream* (1949), and *The Journey* (1954).

In concert with *South Today*'s advocacy of equality, representation, and access to information, Smith and Snelling increasingly strove to structure the magazine in ways that centred community and brought as many voices into dialogue as possible. As Eurie Dahn argues, "The newspapers and magazines of the Jim Crow era, both Black and white, [were] key sites where readers and writers worked toward bottom-up sociopolitical changes."<sup>10</sup> From the beginning, Smith and Snelling invited contributors and other activists to visit them at their home, and these gatherings would often become sites of organizing.<sup>11</sup> Within the magazine, Smith and Snelling grew increasingly attentive to whose voices were being featured, moving from what began as an exclusively white contributorship to a 64% white, 30% Black, and 6% unknown non-editorial contributorship in the

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<sup>9</sup> See Tanya Long Bennett, *Critical Essays on the Writings of Lillian Smith*, ed. Tanya Long Bennett (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Eurie Dahn, *Jim Crow Networks: African American Periodical Cultures* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Due to *South Today*'s lack of ability to pay contributors, Smith and Snelling offered these stays as a form of compensation. They often invited many guests at once and these gatherings—which were often interracial and therefore inherently political in their violation of Georgia's segregation laws—offered a safe space of sorts for socializing, networking, and political organizing. See Will Brantley, "Letter-Writing, Authorship, and Southern Women Modernists," *The Oxford Handbook of Literature of the U.S. South*, ed. Fred Hobson and Barbara Ladd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–18.

*South Today* era of publication.<sup>12</sup> However, increasingly feeling the form of the magazine to be too one-directional, with Smith writing “we need two-way sets, and many more stations,” Smith and Snelling introduced dedicated spaces within the magazine where readers could contribute.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, *South Today*’s readership had a notably visible presence on the page (see Figure 1). For example, in 1939, Smith and Snelling started a reader contest called “Do You Know Your South?” which invited readers to test their knowledge of Southern history and contemporary socio-political conditions in the South. That same year, they also began a recurring reader essay forum, wherein readers could share their perspectives on topical questions about World War II, conscription, and the role (or not) of religion in the South. They also published excerpts of the reader letters they received on the back cover of each issue. In these ways, the magazine had a much more visible display of readership than other contemporary Southern journals, such as *Phylon* or the *Southern Review*, which were more academic.<sup>14</sup> I read these efforts as attempts to organize *South Today* as a democratic, inclusive, and collective project.

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<sup>12</sup> Butchart, “The Literary Activism,” 115.

<sup>13</sup> Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling, “Dialing the South ...On Democracy [Editors’ note],” *The North Georgia Review: A Magazine of the Southern Regions* 4, no. 2 & 3, (Autumn 1939): 43.

<sup>14</sup> A quarterly and later semi-annual journal, *Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race & Culture* was founded in 1940 by W.E.B. Du Bois, who had returned to Atlanta University in 1933 to head the Sociology Department. Between 1940 and 1944, Du Bois worked as editor of *Phylon*, with Ira De A. Reid as managing editor and an editorial board composed of Atlanta University faculty members. Du Bois’ motivation was to interrogate the concept of race in order to more effectively theorize and fight for the liberation of people of colour globally. See Alexa Benson Henderson and Janice Sumler-Edmond, “Editors’ Introduction,” *Freedom’s Odyssey: African American History Essays From Phylon* (Atlanta: Clark Atlanta University Press, 1999), 1–5. In contrast, the *Southern Review* was founded at Baton Rouge’s Louisiana State University in 1935 by its president, James Monroe Smith, and was backed by Senator Huey Long, who allotted the journal a \$10,000 annual stipend (Cutrer 49). The quarterly was edited by Charles Pipkin, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren, the latter two of whom were closely affiliated with the Southern Agrarians (41). See Thomas W. Cutrer, *Parnassus on the Mississippi: The Southern Review and the Baton Rouge Literary Community, 1935–1942* (Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

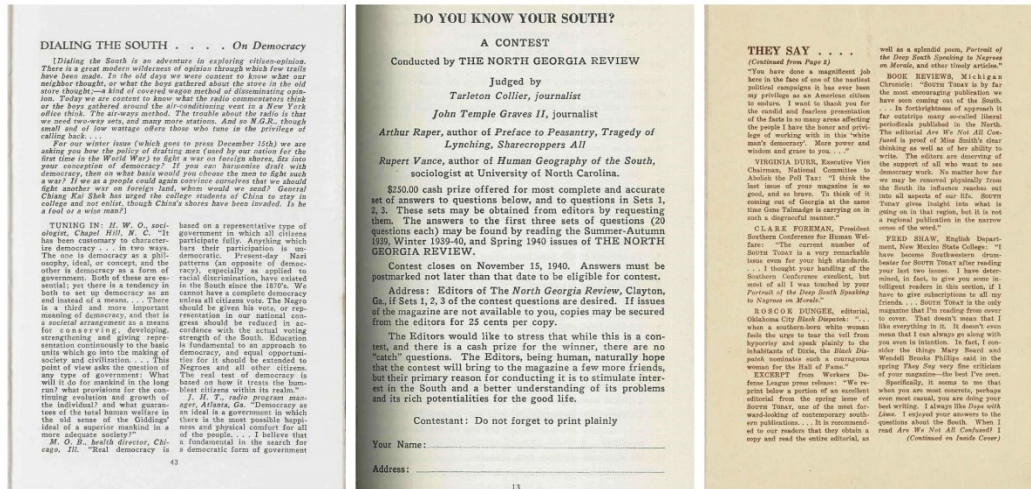


Figure 1. Examples of “Dialing the South” Reader Forums, “Do You Know Your South?” Quiz Contests, and “They Say” Reader Letters<sup>15</sup>

Despite such efforts to lessen a “top-down” contributorship and encourage a sense of political counterpublic, these community print spaces were still highly mediated by *South Today*’s editors, who had the final say on which letters were published and how they were excerpted. Furthermore, such respondents offer only a limited glimpse into a small subset of the readership who had the time, resources, and occupational experience to participate. Therefore, one of this article’s goals is to explore *South Today*’s greater readership and the less visible ways readers participated in the project.

## Studying Readerships

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in understanding the demographics and participation of historical periodical readerships. I see this interest as connected to broader methodological inquiries within periodical studies, which aim to subvert the privileging of content, editors, and the single text in our scholarly inquiry—and, additionally, to consider

<sup>15</sup> “Dialing the South ... On Democracy [Editors’ note],” *The North Georgia Review* 4, no. 2 & 3 (Autumn 1939): 43; “Do You Know Your South—A Contest,” *The North Georgia Review* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1940): 13; “They Say ...” *South Today* 7, no. 2 (Autumn-Winter 1942–43): 66. Courtesy of the Lillian E. Smith Center, Piedmont University.



materiality, “off-the-page” work, community formation, networks of circulation, and interrelations between texts.<sup>16</sup> To date, most studies of historical readerships have been theoretical rather than reconstructive. Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community”<sup>17</sup> (large, geographically distributed, non-face-to-face forms of community as constructed imaginaries), public sphere theory, and counterpublic scholarship, such as the work of Michael Warner and Nancy Fraser, have helpfully illustrated how an imagined readership is often rhetorically constructed through content and address.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as Gemma Outen observes, such *implied* (i.e., imagined) readerships are not always synonymous with their *historical* (i.e., “real”) readerships.<sup>19</sup> While studies of imagined readerships offer important insights into editorial priorities and counterpublic formation, relying solely on readerly address and representation on the page produces a highly mediated and speculative sense of who was reading and participating.

Studies of “real” readerships have predominantly been conducted with modern magazines, using a combination of empirical and narrative methods to ascertain demographics and understand how readers engage with texts.<sup>20</sup> These types of questions are naturally less easy to ask of

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<sup>16</sup> See Lucy Delap and Maria DiCenzo, “Transatlantic Print Culture: The Anglo-American Feminist Press and Emerging ‘Modernities,’” in *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880–1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms*, ed. Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (London: Palgrave, 2008), 51, 63; Ann Ardis, “Towards a Theory of Periodical Studies,” *MLA* (2013): 1–2, [seeeps.princeton.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/243/2015/03/mla2013\\_ardis.pdf](https://www.eeps.princeton.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/243/2015/03/mla2013_ardis.pdf); Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminism Accountability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002); Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56–80. See also: Shawn Lisa Maurer, “The Periodical,” in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1690–1750*, ed. Ros Ballaster (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Agatha Beins, “A Publishing Assemblage: Building Book History Methodology through Feminist Periodicals,” *American Periodicals* 8, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>19</sup> Gemma Outen, “‘A Dearth of Specific Information’? Readers and Readerships in the Women’s Total Abstinence Union,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 53, no. 4 (2020): 544.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Brita Ytre-Arne employs a cultural studies approach by using questionnaires and interviews to conduct a quantitative analysis of modern readerships of *KK* in order to understand “women’s magazine reading as a social practice situated in everyday life.” See Brita Ytre-Arne, “Women’s Magazines and their Readers: The Relationship Between Textual

historical readerships due to the lack of extant subscriber lists, library records, and living readers. And yet, Outen has compellingly complicated this supposed “dearth of specific information” by tracing the readership of The Women’s Total Abstinence Union’s journal *Wings* through club membership records.<sup>21</sup> Outen found the readership to hold a variety of social and class positions, with many of the women members living lives very different from the “ideal of womanhood” presented in the magazine, therefore revealing the extent of the gap between implied and historical readerships. Might we, therefore, gain an understanding of *how* and *why* historical periodical readerships engaged with what they read by considering this gap between imagined and real readerships? Informed by Outen’s methodologies, I propose that we can pursue a study of what I call a “documented readership.” By combining empirical studies of *South Today*’s subscribership with textual analysis of the magazine’s readers as they appear on the page and in the archive, I was able to reconstruct a profile of its documented readership. Not only does such data tell us about the demographics and lived experiences of the people who were reading at the time of publication, it also shows how they interacted with the magazine and the larger community of readers.

### ***South Today* Subscriber Data Project and Methodology**

My reconstruction of *South Today*’s readership is based on the surviving 2,847 subscriber records for the magazine’s final year of publication (1944–1945) held in the Lillian Eugenia Smith Papers at the University of Georgia archives.<sup>22</sup> I undertook this data collection to trace fuller demographics of *South Today*’s readership (including gender, racialization, age, marital status, parental status, education level, occupation, income, class, number in household, and location) with the aim of better understanding the magazine’s audience and reach. There are some caveats

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Features and Practices of Reading,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (2011): 213.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Beetham qtd. in Outen, 544.

<sup>22</sup> An office fire in 1944 destroyed all of *South Today*’s subscription records. There are no “M’s” among the subscriber cards.

to this archival source. Firstly, these cards only capture the magazine's final year and do not tell us how demographics changed over time. Secondly, these records appear to be incomplete, as they account for only 2,847 subscribers in a year in which Smith and Snelling reported a subscription base of 5,000, in keeping with the number of copies they ordered from their printers.<sup>23</sup> Although undocumented single-issue purchases could explain this disparity, this nevertheless qualifies my conclusions about *South Today*'s subscribers as illustrative rather than fully representative.

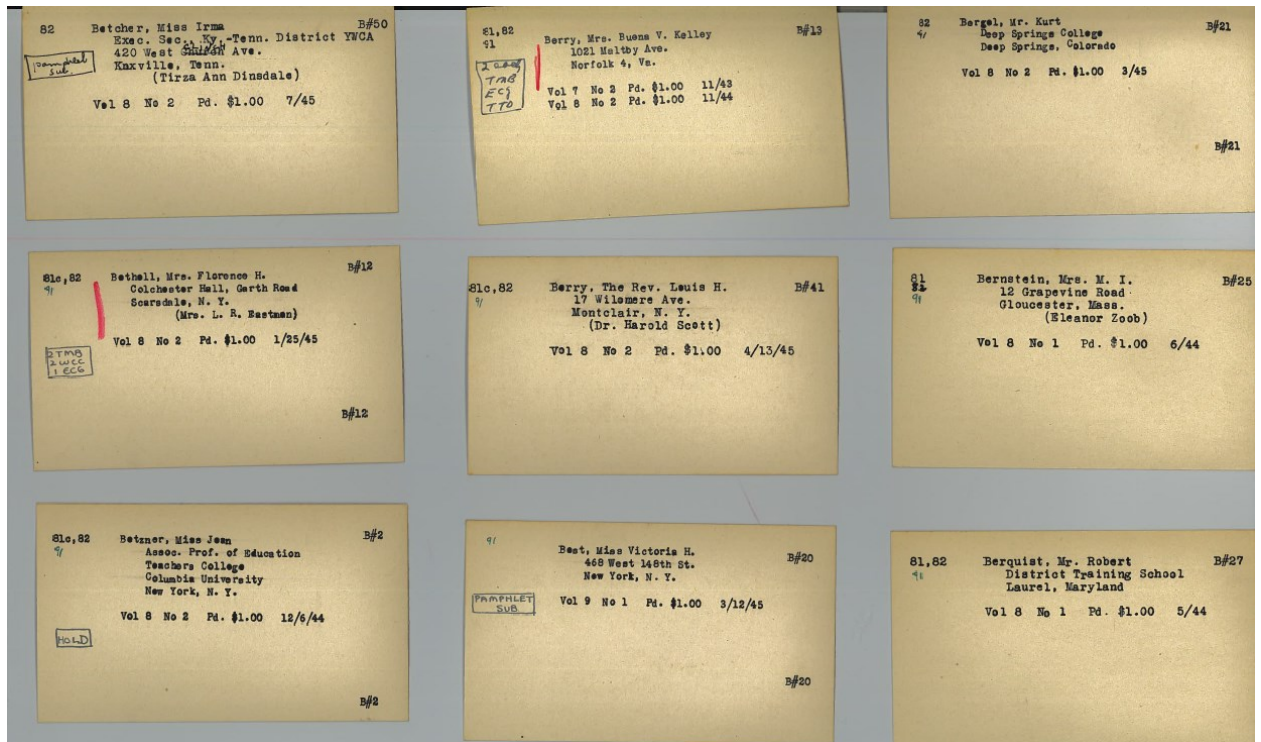


Figure 2. Examples of archival subscriber records<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling, "Yes ... we are southern," *South Today* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1943): 42–3; David S. Morse, "[Letter to Paula Snelling] July 12, 1943," Lillian Smith Papers, Series 2: The South Today—Correspondence and Records, Box 9, "Rich Printing Co. 1942–44." Literary Manuscripts Collection, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

<sup>24</sup> Lillian Eugenia Smith Papers (ms1283a, Box 95–97), Courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library/University of Georgia Libraries.

Thirdly, my effort to cross-reference subscriber names and addresses with census data, military records, street directories, and death certificates confirmed only 58% (1,428) of individual subscribers with a high degree of certainty (with schools, libraries, organizations, etc. excluded). Subscriber relocation, PO boxes, common names, initials, and online accessibility of these archival records for different countries were challenges I also encountered that made locating some individuals impossible.

Fourthly, subscribers constitute only a portion of a periodical's total readership. While the subscription cards list only the person who took out the subscription, many individual subscribers lived with partners, family, roommates, and boarders who also possibly read the magazine, a phenomenon Isabelle Lehuu formulates as a "reading household."<sup>25</sup> By tallying the number of people living in the households of 1,428 of *South Today*'s known subscribers at the time of the 1940 census,<sup>26</sup> we learn that these subscriptions potentially yielded 4,951 more people who may have read or at least been aware of the magazine.<sup>27</sup> Based on this data, we can extrapolate that *South Today*'s potential reading household could be as much as 3.5 times larger than its documented subscribership. Subscribers also testified to sharing their copies with friends, work colleagues, acquaintances, and relatives *outside* their households, which would increase the potential readership represented by individual subscriptions even further. Finally, subscriptions account neither for those who read library copies nor those who purchased single issues, and these exclusions could potentially reveal different demographics than those I can reconstruct

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<sup>25</sup> Isabelle Lehuu, "Reconstructing Reading Vogues in the Old South: Borrowings from the Charleston Library Society, 1811–1817," *The History of Reading, Volume 1: International Perspectives, c. 1500–1990*, ed. Shafquat Towheed and W. R. Owens (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 81n21.

<sup>26</sup> Megan Butchart, "Contributors, Published Authors, Forum Respondents, and Subscribers to Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling's Little Magazine *South Today*," Borealis: UAlberta Research Data Collection, 2023, [doi.org/10.5683/SP3/BIH0ST](https://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/BIH0ST).

<sup>27</sup> I base this household count on the 1940 census, as the closest year to 1944. The household sizes of 1,319 out of 2,480 individuals (53.2%) could be determined. I found that 1,273 (or 96.5%), lived in households of ten or fewer people; 116 (8.8%) lived alone.

from individual subscribers' cards.<sup>28</sup> Thousands of pamphlets, re-prints, and single issues were sold, and at least 367 subscriptions were purchased by camps, churches, a city, companies, publications, libraries, schools, and organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA); these circulated copies possibly saw hundreds to thousands of readers. Such networks that go beyond the single subscriber are perhaps why some scholars estimate that *South Today's* circulation was at least 10,000.<sup>29</sup> Despite these limitations in reconstructing a real readership, the dataset I have built from the 1944–1945 subscriber records nevertheless yields illuminating insights regarding who was reading *South Today*.

It must be noted that although empirical data can capture scale, overarching patterns, and changes over time, no data is neutral or conclusive. Given my focus on a magazine that intended to address, if not redress, racial inequities in the South, it is important to acknowledge that identity-based data collection reliant on historical state-produced identification records is fraught with ethical considerations. As Richard Jean So explains, “Historically, we understand empirical methods as typically creating racial stratifications and hierarchies, often supporting white-supremacist ideologies and denigrating nonwhite subjects as inferior ... [S]uch methods all too often have been mobilized to support or intensify prevailing racial ideologies.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, it is also essential to consider the problems inherent in using the U.S. federal census as a data source.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Such information could perhaps be reconstructed, to an extent, by looking for the single or “one-time” reader in subscription correspondence or the subscribing libraries' records on borrowers (if they have been preserved), but such research exceeds the scope of this article.

<sup>29</sup> Anne C. Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 22; Helen White and Redding S. Sugg, Jr., *From the Mountain: Selections from Pseudopodia (1936), The North Georgia Review (1937–1941), and South Today (1942–1945)*, ed. Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1972), xi.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Jean So, *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Post War Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 16.

<sup>31</sup> See Paul Schor, *Counting Americans: How the US Census Classified the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History, Second Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

Firstly, the U.S. census is taken every ten years, with respective data published seventy-two years after each census. I selected the 1940 census, as it was the closest to the subscriber data; however, much can change in four to five years, and therefore, there are limitations to using a 1940 source for data from 1944–1945. Secondly, while census data, to some extent, reflects a form of self-identification, there was a clause in the 1940 handbook that allowed enumerators to revise any enumerated individual's answer that they “believe[d] to be false” and “enter upon the schedule the correct answer as nearly as [they could] ascertain it.”<sup>32</sup> Consequently, there were potential opportunities for enumerator bias and inaccuracies. Furthermore, gender and racialization categories were strictly controlled according to binaries and the “one-drop rule,” respectively, which meant that it was not possible for respondents to record more complex identities. Indeed, social categories in the 1930s and 1940s were generally comprised of—and operated to resecure—highly essentialized binaries, as is evident in the ideas and vocabularies of male/female and white/non-white.<sup>33</sup> While we know many individuals refused such binaries and constructs, including Pauli Murray, who contributed to *South Today*, and Jean Toomer, who was featured on *South Today* reading lists, it is not always possible to know how individuals who have not left a written record self-identified. Therefore, I reference this data with the recognition that such categories

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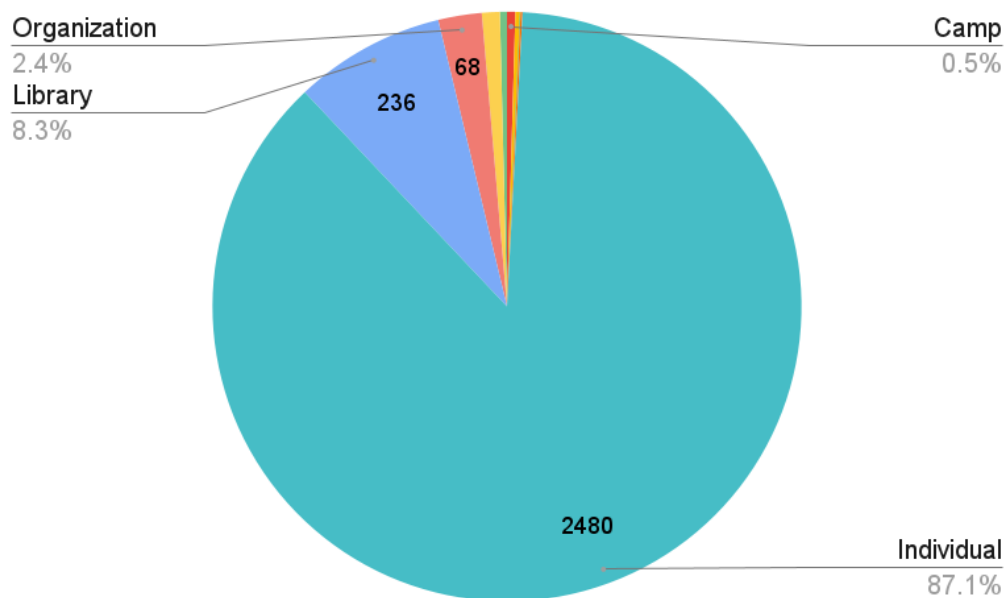
<sup>32</sup> Bureau of the Census. “Sixteenth Decennial Census of the United States. Instructions to Enumerators. Population and Agriculture. 1940,” 4. United States Census Bureau. Accessed on 22 April 2023. [census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/technical-documentation/questionnaires/1940/1940-instructions.html](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/technical-documentation/questionnaires/1940/1940-instructions.html).

<sup>33</sup> For example, in terms of gender, the 1940 census only allowed “Male” and “Female,” and in terms of racialization, only allowed “White (including Mexican),” “Negro,” “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Japanese,” “Filipino,” “Hindu,” and “Korean” (Bureau of the Census 43). The “one-drop” rule was in full effect, with the 1940 census enumerator handbook stipulating that “Any mixture of white and nonwhite should be reported according to the nonwhite parent” (43). See Bureau of the Census, “Sixteenth Decennial Census of the United States. Instructions to Enumerators. Population and Agriculture. 1940,” United States Census Bureau, [census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/technical-documentation/questionnaires/1940/1940-instructions.html](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/technical-documentation/questionnaires/1940/1940-instructions.html). As such, multiracial heritages were not recognized. I have chosen to update language and recognize bi/multiraciality where known. Richard Jean So uses the finite racial vocabulary of “white,” “black,” and “nonblack racial minority or person of color” (194n53); I draw from a slightly broader vocabulary that separates out distinct ethnic and cultural identities instead of combining them under “People of Colour.”

were potentially ascribed regardless of personal identification and are deeply implicated in larger projects of socialization and, specifically, racialization.

### **Reconstructing the Historical Subscribership of *South Today***

Despite these limitations, the dataset reveals both the diversity of readerships beyond an imagined audience and the lateral networks of participation and community that exist among reading publics. In gaining a sense of the demographics and intersectional lived experiences of the greater readership of *South Today*, we are in a better position to speculate as to what aspects of the magazine might have held appeal and potentially encouraged participation, whether discursively or non-discursively. Of the 2,847 subscribers documented in *South Today*'s 1944–1945 records, 87% were individuals, 8% were libraries and schools, 2% were organizations, 1% were publications, and the remaining 2% were Civilian Public Service camps, churches, cities, and companies. In the following sections, I will focus on the demographics of the “individual” subscriber category.



*Figure 3. Type of Subscriber*

## Gender

Of the 2,419 (or 98%) of subscribers for whom gender could be determined, 56% were women, 40% were men, and 4% were co-subscribers of different genders.<sup>34</sup> This is not surprising, as periodicals were known by editors at the time to generally attract more women readers, hence the rise of advertising directed toward them, the presence of women's pages, and the publication of "ladies' magazines."<sup>35</sup> *South Today's* female editorship and its significant percentage of women contributors (38% excluding editors, or 85% including editors) may also have appealed to women readers.

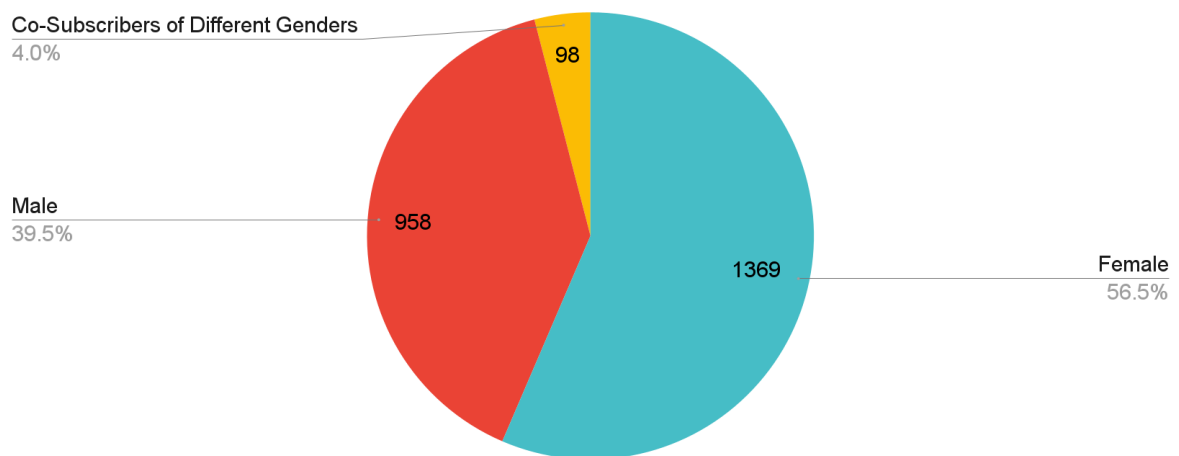


Figure 4. Gender of Subscriber<sup>36</sup>

## Racialization

Of the 1,389 (or 56%) of individual subscribers for whom racialization could be determined, 70% were white, and 29% were Black.<sup>37</sup> According

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<sup>34</sup> Gender was determined by a combination of honorifics, where applicable, and census data.

<sup>35</sup> Maurer, 156.

<sup>36</sup> The gender of 2,419 out of 2,480 individuals (97.5%) could be determined.

<sup>37</sup> I use the term "racialization" instead of "race" to signal that this is a construct, rather than something innate or biological. Racialization was determined according to census data, and so is limited by the way in which the census is, itself, a racializing tool that reduced complexity to



to the 1940 U.S. census, the American population was 89.8% white, 9.8% Black, and 0.4% “other.”<sup>38</sup> Due to *South Today*’s focus on unpacking the construct of whiteness and addressing white readers, a 70% white subscribership is not surprising in its alignment with the imagined reader. And yet, a 29% Black subscribership is also significant for a white-edited Southern magazine. The Southern press was highly segregated at this time,<sup>39</sup> and therefore, we might wonder to what extent the readership was as well. While we do not have access to comparative readership data for other Southern magazines, this subscribership, in documenting readers beyond an implied readership of “white southerners,” offers new possibilities for understanding readership not just in terms of address or identification but also solidarity, education, and reading across difference.

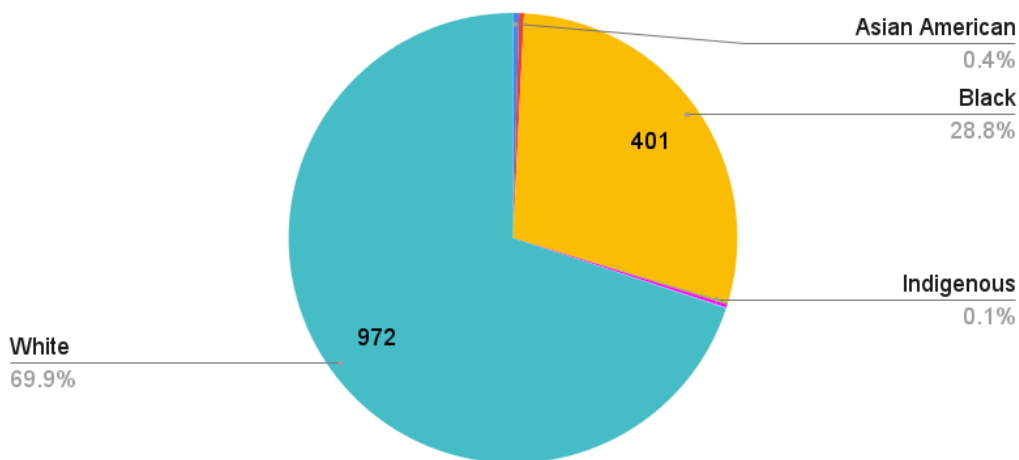


Figure 5. Racialization of Subscriber<sup>40</sup>

binaries. Of the remaining 1% of subscribers, 0.4% were Asian American, 0.4% were biracial/multiracial, 0.07% were Indigenous, 0.07% were Latin American, 0.2% were Latino/a, and 0.07% were Middle Eastern American.

<sup>38</sup> David Morgan, “1940 U.S. Census data released online,” CBS News, April 2, 2012, [cbsnews.com/news/1940-us-census-data-released-online/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/1940-us-census-data-released-online/).

<sup>39</sup> John T. Kneebone, *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920–1944* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), xiv.

<sup>40</sup> The racialization of 1,389 out of 2,480 individuals (56.0%) could be determined. Racialization groups not visible on the pie chart are 0.4% biracial/multiracial, 0.07% Latin American, 0.2% Latino/a, and 0.07% Middle Eastern American.

## Gender and Racialization

Intersectionally, white women emerged as the most common subscriber group at 45%, followed by white men at 23%, Black men at 18%, and Black women at 11%.<sup>41</sup> From this data, we can see that a consideration of racialization complicates assertions about female readerships with issues of intersectionality. The relatively low percentage of Black female subscribers might be attributable to the magazine's relative lack of Black female contributors, to a deficiency in the magazine's attempt at diversity of contributor representation, or possibly to how household subscriptions were held in husbands' rather than wives' names. As I explore below (see Figure 9), *South Today's* white female subscribers were primarily unmarried, whereas its Black female subscribership was primarily married; while speculative, it is possible that married women were more likely to subscribe under their husbands' names.

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<sup>41</sup> In Figure 6, I include data on the other positionalities present among the subscribership; however, due to the lack of significant data, I refrain from making any observations.

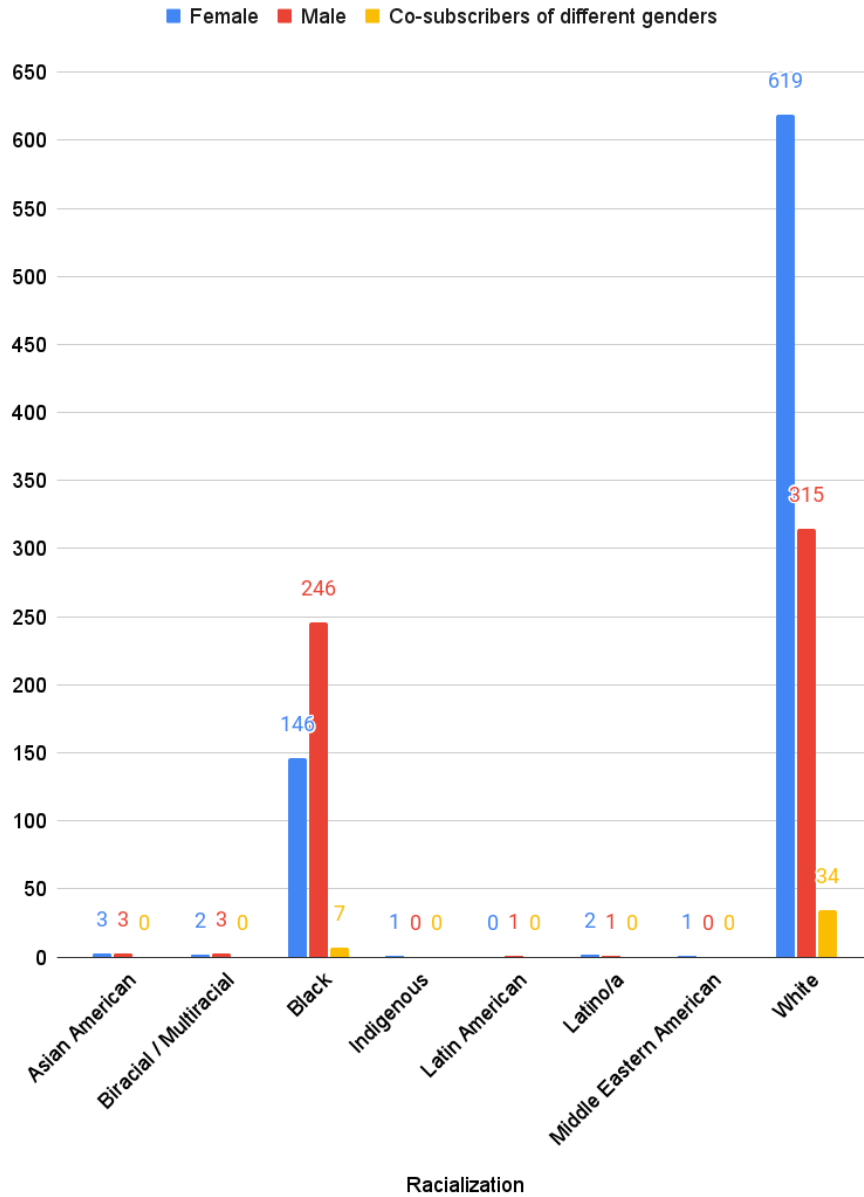


Figure 6. Intersection of Gender and Racialization of Subscriber<sup>42</sup>

## Age

*South Today's* readership was intergenerational; the average age of subscribers in 1944 was forty-seven, and there was a seventy-three-year

<sup>42</sup> This table captures 1,384 out of 2,480 individuals (55.8%) for whom both racialization and gender are known.

difference between the oldest and youngest subscribers. The magazine often featured youth-centred forums and student essay contests, which may have helped appeal to a younger demographic. It is also interesting to note that the average age of forty-seven corresponded with the age of editors Smith (age forty-seven) and Snelling (age forty-five) in 1944. The presence of a readership over the age of seventy also perhaps reveals a continuity of anti-racist organizing in the South and evidence of what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and others call the “long civil rights movement.”<sup>43</sup> For example, Black clubwoman and anti-lynching activist Mary Church Terrell was eighty years old at the time of subscribing.

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<sup>43</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 2 (2005): 1233–1263.

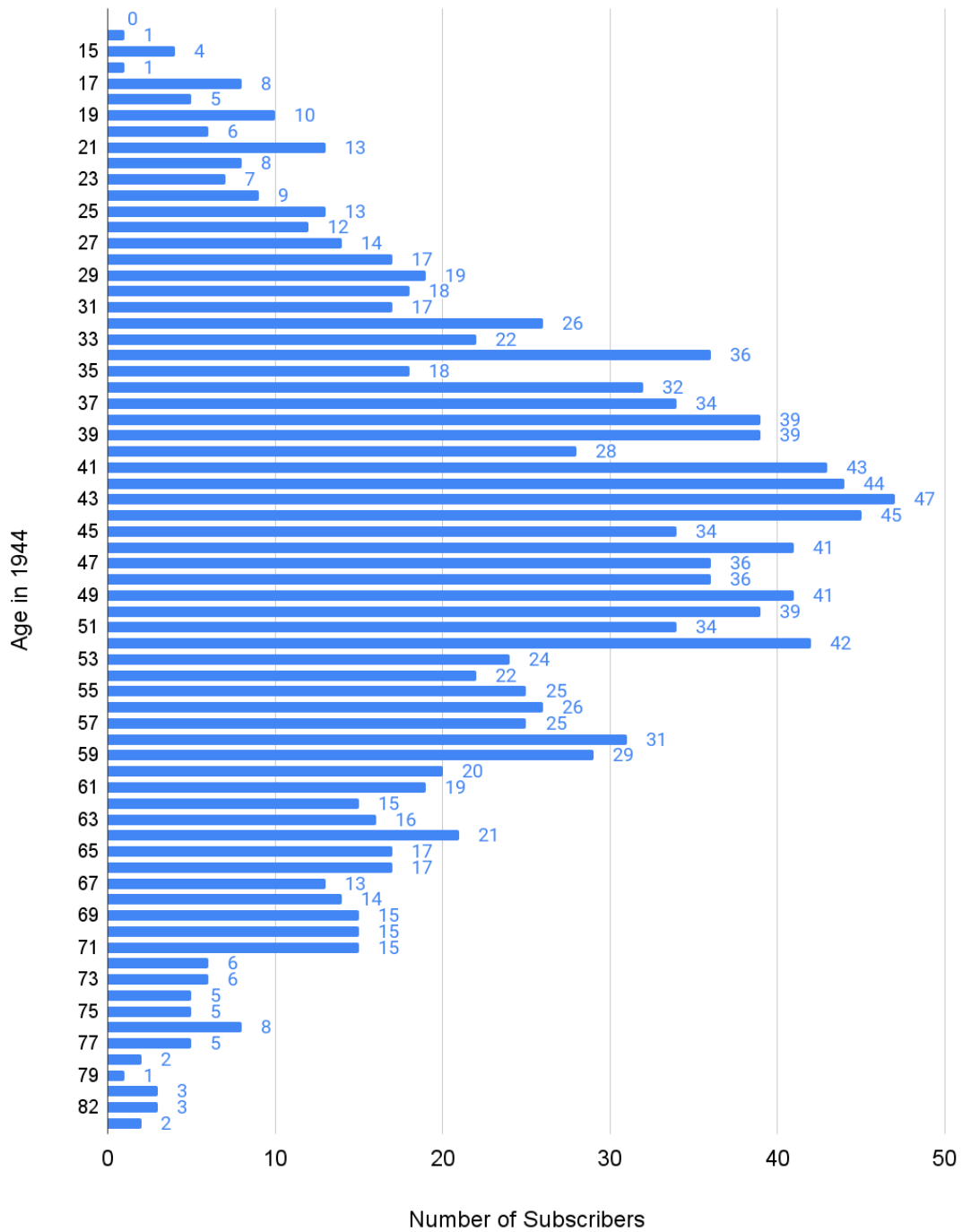


Figure 7. *Age of Subscribers in 1944*<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> The ages of 1,363 out of 2,480 individuals (55.0%) could be determined.

## Marital Status

Of 1,334 subscribers (or 54%) for whom marital status could be determined, 61% were married, 34% were not married, 4% were widowed, and 1% were divorced.<sup>45</sup> Considering the average age of subscribers and social expectations of the time, a high marriage rate among subscribers is not surprising; these numbers also align closely with those of the general American population at this time.<sup>46</sup>

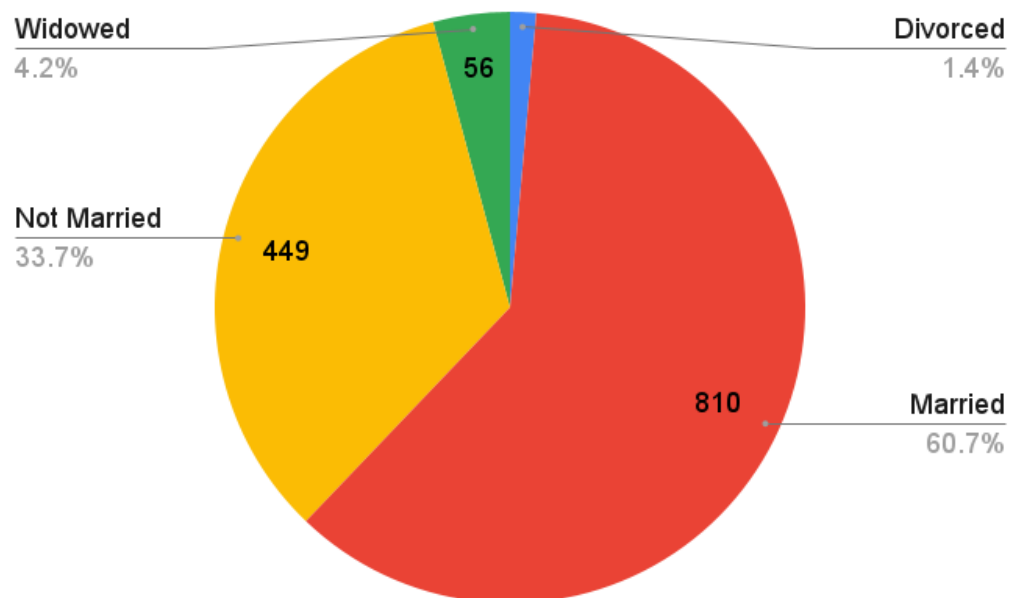


Figure 8. Marital Status of Subscriber<sup>47</sup>

As illustrated in Figure 9, “not married” white women were the most common subscriber group, followed by married white women; this is also

<sup>45</sup> By “not married,” I refer to those who were single and unmarried at the time of subscribing in 1944. This does not discount the possibility that such subscribers married at some point in their life. I differentiate this group from the previously married “widowed” and “divorced” categories.

<sup>46</sup> Valerie Schweizer, “Marriage: More than a Century of Change, 1900–2018,” *Bowling Green State University, Family Profile* no. 21 (2020), n.p. [bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/schweizer-marriage-century-change-1900-2018-fp-20-21.html](https://bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/schweizer-marriage-century-change-1900-2018-fp-20-21.html).

<sup>47</sup> The marital status of 1,334 out of 2,480 individuals (53.8%) could be determined.

one of the few instances wherein “not married” outstrips “married” as a category.<sup>48</sup> In all other positionalities (e.g., gender, racialization), there were more married than unmarried subscribers in 1944–1945.

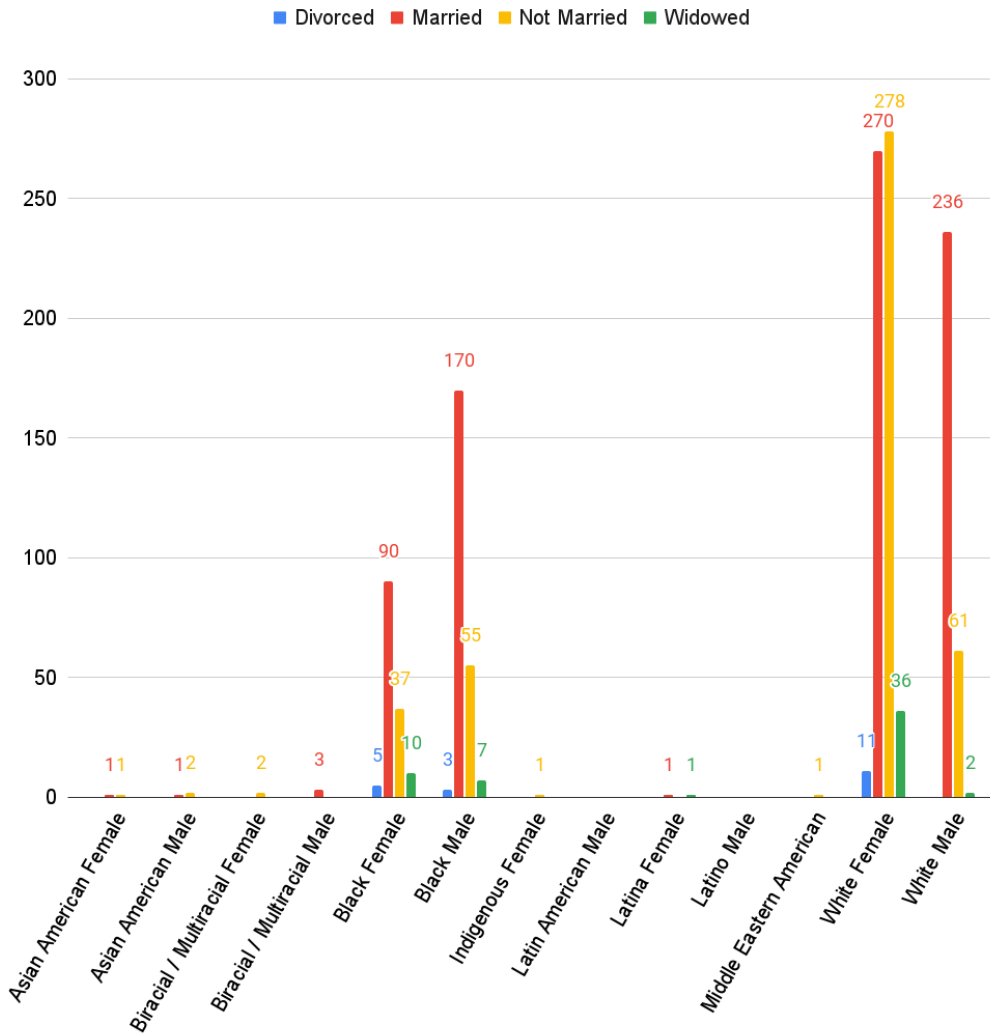


Figure 9. Intersection of Gender, Racialization, and Marital Status of Subscriber<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> The Biracial/Multiracial Female and Indigenous Female categories also have more not married than married people; however, these sample sizes (two and one, respectively) are too small to offer reliable data for speculative observations. Therefore, while with more data we might still find this to be the case, without more data I cannot responsibly draw conclusions from it.

<sup>49</sup> This table captures 1,285 out of 2,480 individuals (51.8%) for whom racialization, gender, and marital status are all known. Not included are the 4.0% of co-subscribers who had different

## Parental Status

Of those 1,332 individual subscribers (or 54%) for whom 1940 census records could be found, 41% had children living at home with them. Partly due to Smith and Snelling's work as directors of the Laurel Falls Girls Camp, education and anti-racist pedagogy were major focuses of the magazine and perhaps appealed to this particular readership as parents.

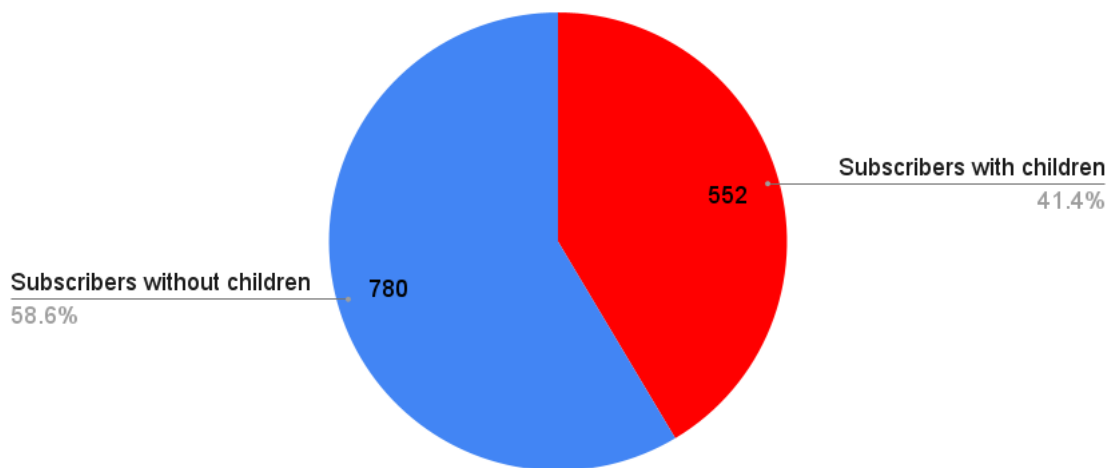


Figure 10. Parental Status of Subscriber<sup>50</sup>

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intersectional identities along the axis of gender as captured in Figure 4; however, many of those co-subscribers were married.

<sup>50</sup> The parental status of 1,332 out of 2,480 individuals (53.7%) could be determined. This number is likely under-representative, as I counted only those subscribers with children living at home at the time of the 1940 census rather than those who I could determine had children who had since left home. I also did not cross-reference with the 1950 census in any attempt to capture those subscribers who had children after 1940 and were parents in 1944–1945, for example.



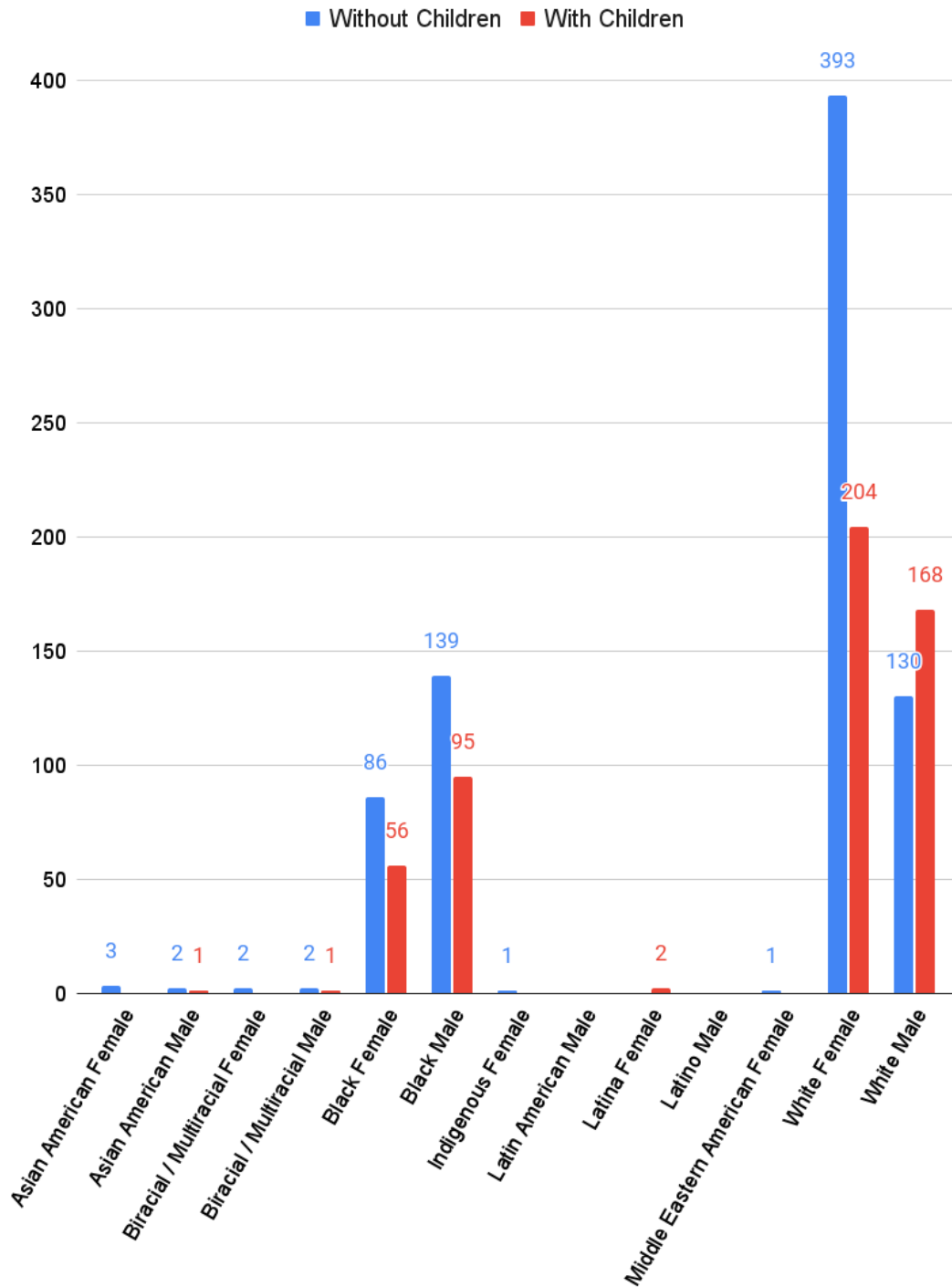


Figure 11. Intersection of Gender, Racialization, and Parental Status of Subscriber<sup>51</sup>

## Education Level

In terms of the 1,172 (or 47%) of 1944–1945 subscribers who recorded their highest education level in the 1940 census (see Figure 12), 0.6% had no formal education, 7% had some level of elementary school education (Grade one to eight), 19% had some level of high school education (Grade nine to twelve), and 73% attended post-secondary (of these individuals, 28% were in grad school or had graduate degrees).<sup>52</sup> According to the 1940 U.S. census, 24.5% of Americans had a high school education, and 4.6% had completed a post-secondary degree.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, *South Today* had a predominantly well-educated readership with post-secondary education levels roughly sixteen times greater than the average American population.

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<sup>51</sup> This table captures 1,286 out of 2,480 individuals (51.9%) for whom racialization, gender, and parental status are all known. Not included are the 4.0% of co-subscribers who had different intersectional identities along the axis of gender as captured in Figure 4.

<sup>52</sup> Highest education level was determined through the 1940 census.

<sup>53</sup> Morgan, n.p.

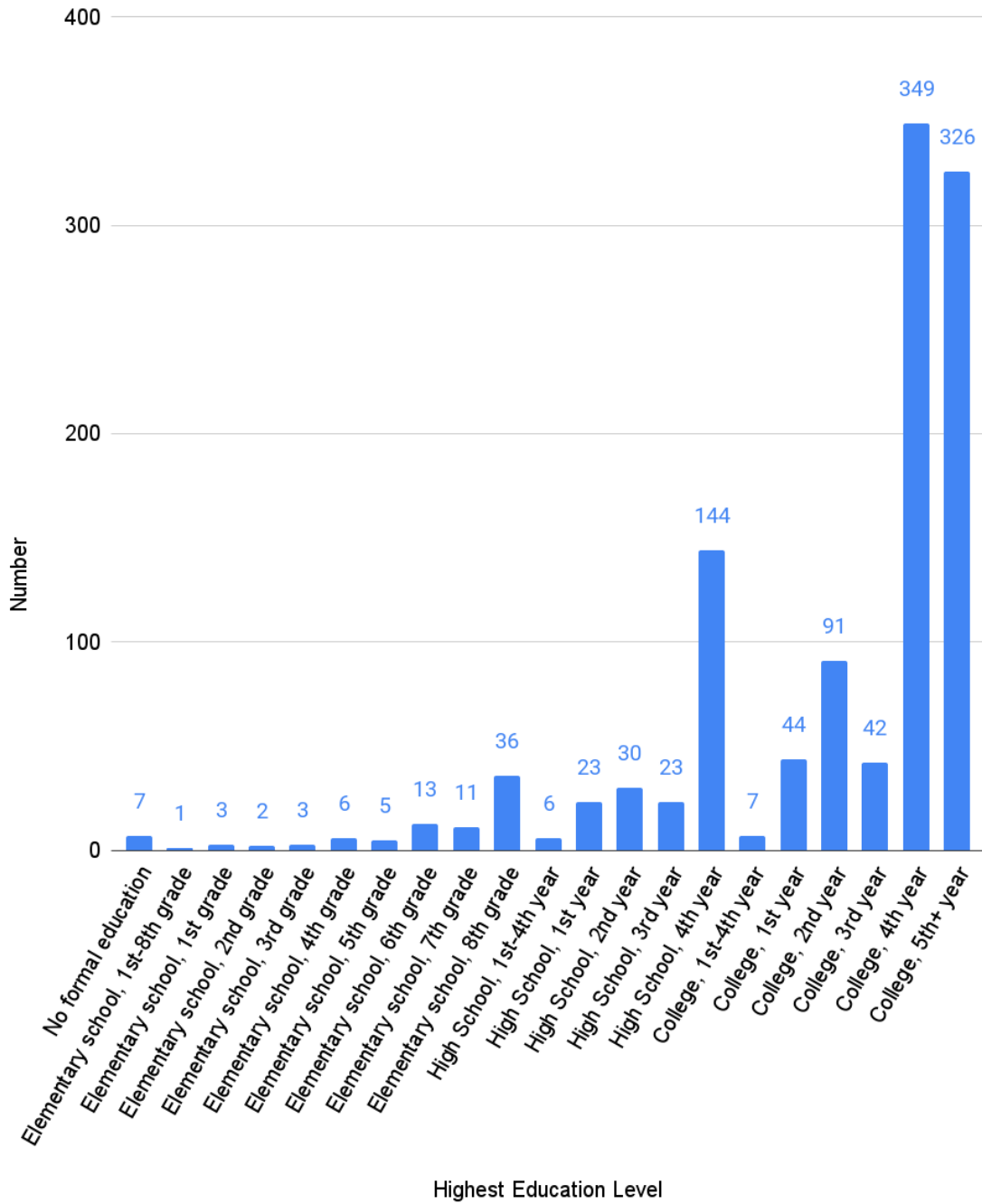


Figure 12. Highest Education Level of Subscriber<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> The highest educational level of 1,172 out of 2,480 individuals (47.3%) could be determined.

As illustrated in Figure 13, proportionally, Black women subscribers and white women subscribers had similar education levels, with most having completed a college degree (Bachelor level). Proportionally, Black men and white men subscribers also had similar education levels, with the largest segments of each group completing a 5+ year college degree (Graduate level).

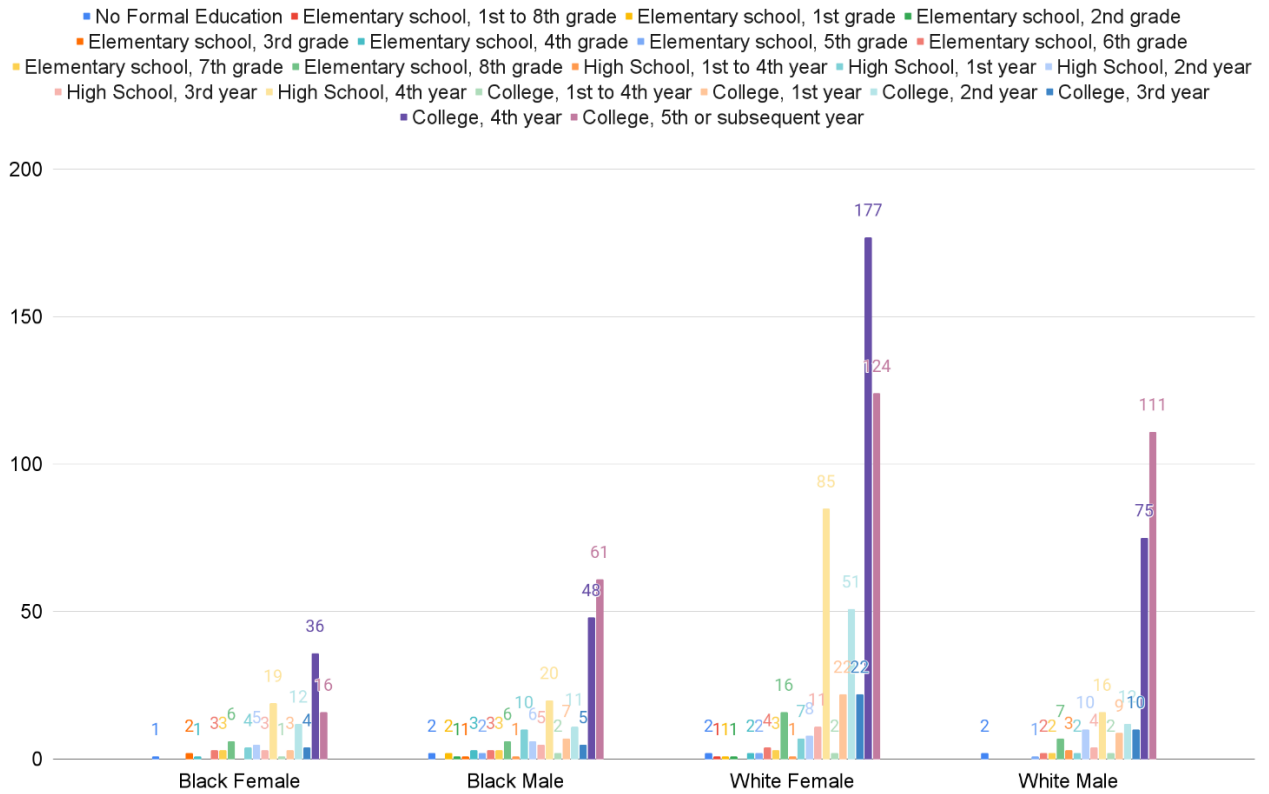


Figure 13. Intersection of Gender, Racialization, and Education Level for Subscriber (Close-Up of Black Female, Black Male, White Female, White Male)<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Close-up of highest education level for categories with the most data. The granularity of these charts by grade illustrates how readers, perhaps due to a variety of reasons including work or care work, would leave school before graduating.

## Occupation

Professions of 1,389 (or 56%) of subscribers to *South Today* were wide-ranging. To examine some of the most frequently occurring categories, 21% worked in education (teachers, principals, professors, etc.), 7% worked in organized religion (minister, nun, rabbi, etc.), 5% worked in healthcare (doctors, nurses, etc.), and 3% worked in domestic labour.<sup>56</sup> For 35% of subscribers, the 1940 census listed no occupation; I have included these “not listed” occupations as a category to recognize the significant presence of people who either were underaged dependents, unemployed, retired, or housewives who did not have a “profession” as such recorded on the 1940 census. Women’s occupations often went unreported if they were not the “head” of the household, hence the disproportionate reporting of “no” occupation for women, and more specifically, white women. This is not surprising, as in a racially stratified society, it is often only white women who can occupy the position of “housewife” because their working wage from an occupation outside the home is not required for the subsistence of the family.

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<sup>56</sup> A complete list of occupations can be found here: Butchart, “The Literary Activism,” 227-229.

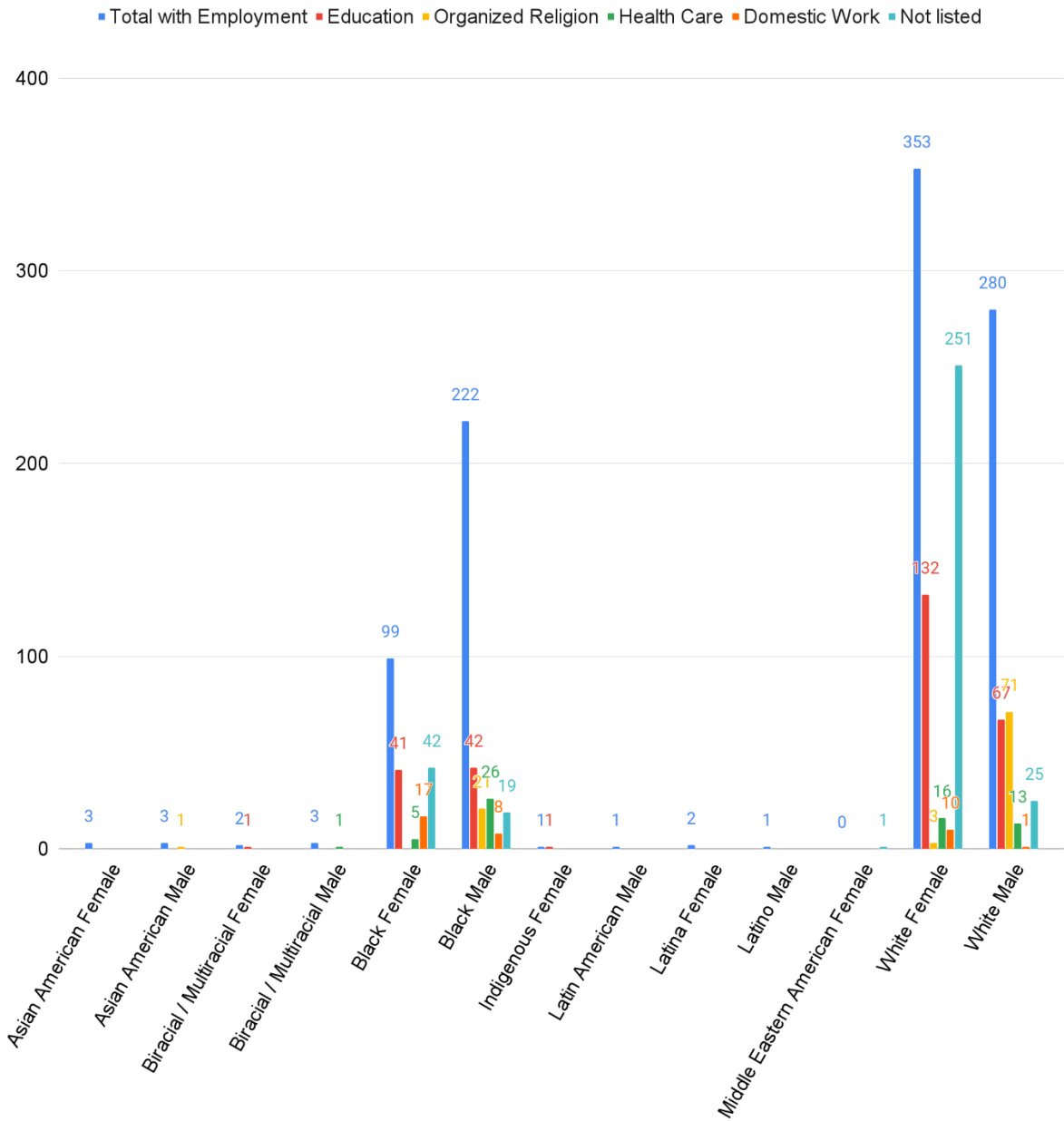


Figure 14. Intersection of Gender, Racialization, and Profession for Subscriber<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> There are 1,308 out of 2,480 individuals (52.7%) for whom racialization, gender, and profession are all known. Not included here are the 4.0% of co-subscribers who had different intersectional identities along the axis of gender as captured in Figure 4.

### Income and Class

The mode for subscribers' annual incomes was \$5,000.<sup>58</sup> If we omit the 338 households who reported combined household incomes of \$0, the average household income of *South Today* subscribers was \$2,473; if we include those who reported a household income of \$0, the household average was \$1,738.<sup>59</sup> Considering that the poverty line in 1940 was \$1,408 annually for a family of four,<sup>60</sup> the average household income of *South Today* subscribers is somewhat low in relation to their relatively high education levels. However, not all subscribers were supporting a family of four on such an income. Although income is not necessarily an accurate indicator of class position, based on this income distribution and the types of occupations held among subscribers, *South Today's* subscribership appears to have been primarily working and middle class.

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<sup>58</sup> Individuals were not required to report their specific income if \$5,000 or over, hence the frequent occurrence of that specific number in the census.

<sup>59</sup> This \$0 income could be attributed to subscribers being underaged dependents, students, unemployed, wives, retired, or involved in professions such as religion-based positions, which might have been remunerated in different ways or required a vow of poverty. For context, a \$1,408 USD income in 1944 adjusted for inflation in 2023 would be \$24,000; \$1,738 would be \$30,000; \$2,473 would be \$42,000; \$5,000 would be \$86,000; and \$8,500 would be \$145,000.

<sup>60</sup> Mark J. Stern, "Poverty and the Life-Cycle, 1940–1960," *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 3 (1991): 525.

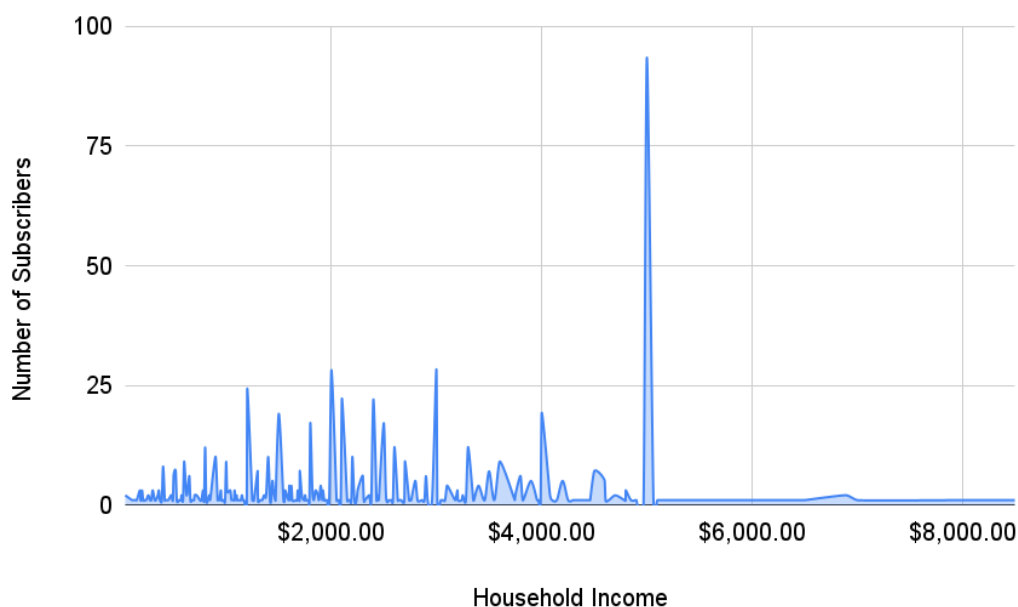


Figure 15. Household Income of Subscriber<sup>61</sup>

To reconcile the education levels and occupation types of subscribers with their incomes, we might also consider the effects of systemic gender- and racialization-based income inequalities, wherein women were paid less than men, and Black people were paid less than white people for the same work or segregated to low-paying positions in the labour market. As Smith observed in the Winter 1941 issue, Mississippi “pays its white teachers an average of \$750; its Negro teachers an average of \$237 per year.”<sup>62</sup> Systemic income inequality is evident in Figure 16, which shows that proportionally, there were greater numbers of white subscribers making over \$5,000 annually than their Black counterparts. While almost all positionalities counted more people earning less than \$1,408 than people earning over \$5,000, there is one exception: more white men earning over \$5,000 subscribed to *South Today* than white men living below the poverty

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<sup>61</sup> The combined household incomes of 1,137 out of 2,480 individuals (45.8%) could be determined. I omitted the 338 individuals who reported household incomes of \$0 from this chart in order to better display the other incomes.

<sup>62</sup> Lillian Smith, “Paw and the Rest of Us,” *The North Georgia Review: A Magazine of the Southern Regions—Special South Today Number 6*, nos. 1–4 (Winter 1941): 43.



line. Furthermore, compared to the numbers represented in Figure 6, Black women are over-represented in the “less than \$1,408” income category by 8.7%, and Black men are over-represented by 4.9%. In comparison, white women are under-represented in that family-poverty threshold by 3.7%, and white men by 6.2%. Conversely, in the “over \$5,000” income category, Black women are proportionally under-represented by 6.7%, and Black men by 12.1%, while white women are over-represented by 6.2% and white men by 16.8%. Therefore, pay inequalities along the intersecting axes of gender and racialization are evident when we consider the class position of *South Today*’s subscribers.

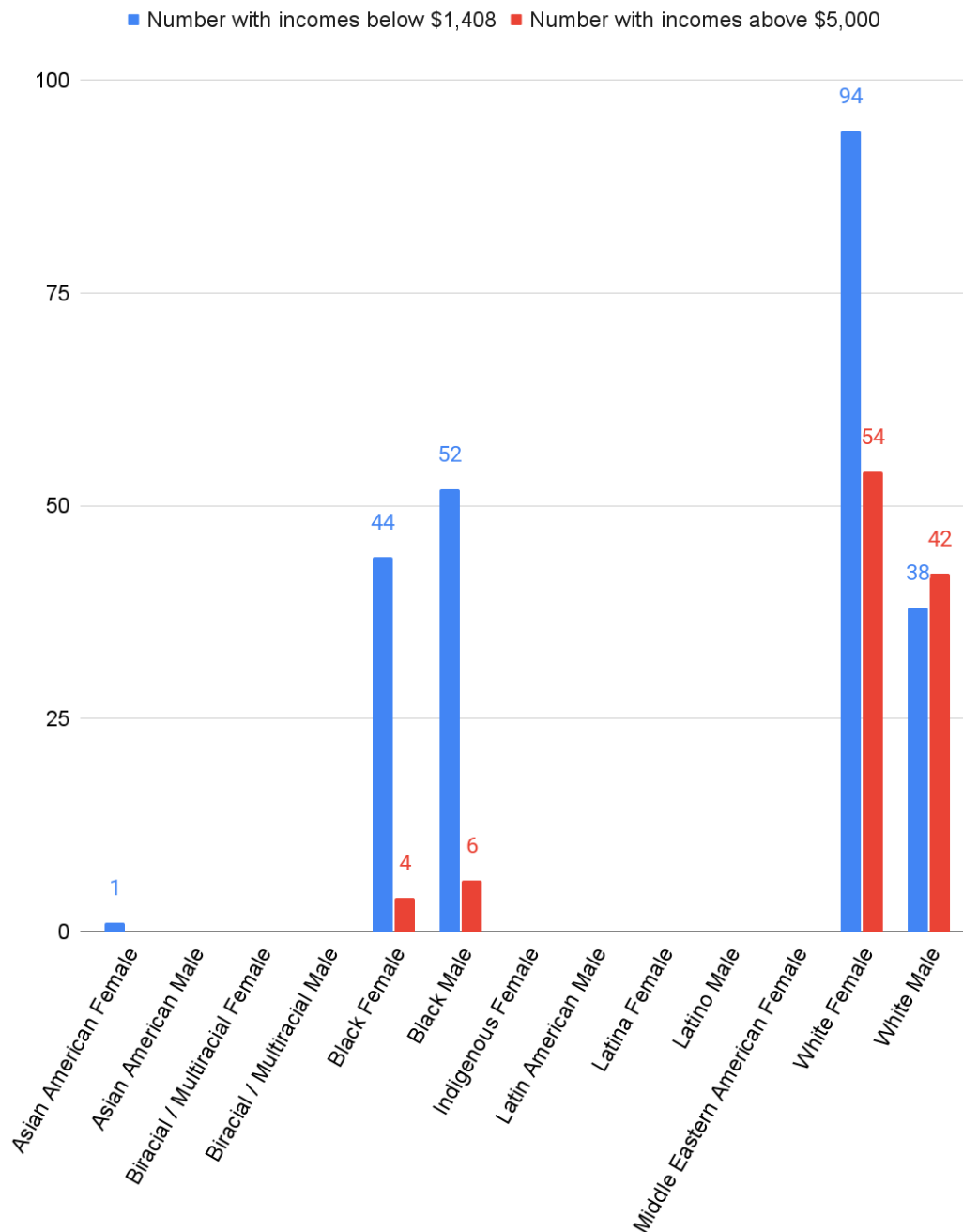


Figure 16. Intersection of Gender, Racialization, and Household Incomes less than \$1,408 and greater than \$5,000 Annually<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> This figure depicts the 229 individuals whose household incomes were less than \$1,408 (the poverty line in 1940 for a family of four) out of 654 individuals (35%) for whom racialization, gender, and household income level are all known. Not included here are the 4.0% of co-

Another potential indicator of class is the presence of domestic workers within the household. At least around 5% of the subscribership had live-in domestic workers, indicating that this portion of the readership were middle- to upper-class. Domestic workers occur most frequently in the households of white women subscribers, followed by the households of white men.

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subscribers who had different intersectional identities along the axis of gender as captured in Figure 4. This figure also depicts the 106 individuals whose household incomes were greater than \$5,000, out of 654 individuals (16.2%) for whom racialization, gender, and household income level are all known. Not included here are the 4.0% of co-subscribers who had different intersectional identities along the axis of gender as captured in Figure 4.

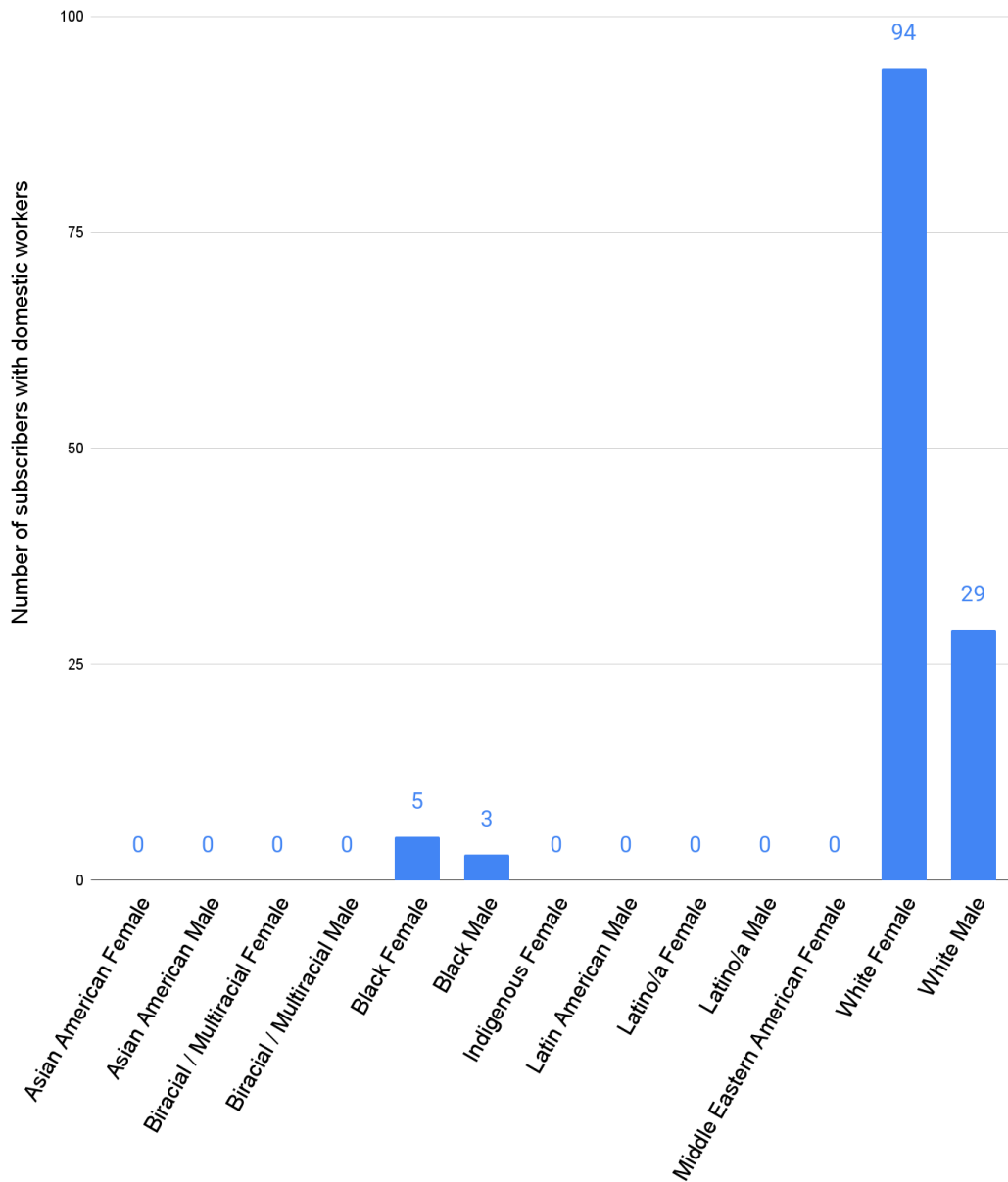


Figure 17. *Intersection of Gender, Racialization, and Live-In Domestic Workers*<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> This figure captures 131 out of 2,480 individuals (5.3%) for whom racialization, gender, and the presence of live-in domestic workers are all known. Not included are the 4.0% of co-subscribers who had different intersectional identities along the axis of gender as captured in Figure 4. Categories of domestic workers reported in the 1940 U.S. Census include: Butler, Caretaker, Chauffeur, Cook, Domestic, Gardener, Helper, Housekeeper, Housemaid, Houseman, Maid, Nurse, Servant, and Yardman.

## Location

Lastly, in terms of location, the Northeast, South, and Midwest were home to the greatest number of subscribers, with the states of New York, California, Georgia, and Illinois ranking highest.<sup>65</sup> While this result is not entirely surprising, I expected a greater density of subscribers in the South since the magazine addressed itself to the political and economic conditions of that region of the country. Certainly, within their correspondence, some subscribers identified themselves as part of a Southern diaspora (e.g. “a Georgian, now teaching in a northern college”).<sup>66</sup> Likewise, among Black subscribers, high proportions of readers in Chicago, New York City, and California also raise the possibility of a Black Southern diaspora among the subscribership, since those were all important sites of Black migration at the time.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, though a “regional” magazine, this widespread and international readership suggests that *South Today*’s anti-racist program was relevant both within and beyond the South. Therefore, while contributors often addressed a “Southern” readership, we can see that the reach was far broader.

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<sup>65</sup> See interactive ArcGIS visualization: Megan Butchart, “Subscribers to *South Today*,” ArcGIS, 2023, [arcgis.com/1PSXiG0](https://arcgis.com/1PSXiG0).

<sup>66</sup> “They Say,” *South Today* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1944–1945): inside front cover.

<sup>67</sup> Albert S. Broussard, “In Search of the Promised Land: African American Migration to San Francisco, 1900–1945,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, ed. Quintard Taylor, Kevin Mulroy, and Lawrence B. de Graaf (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 181–209.

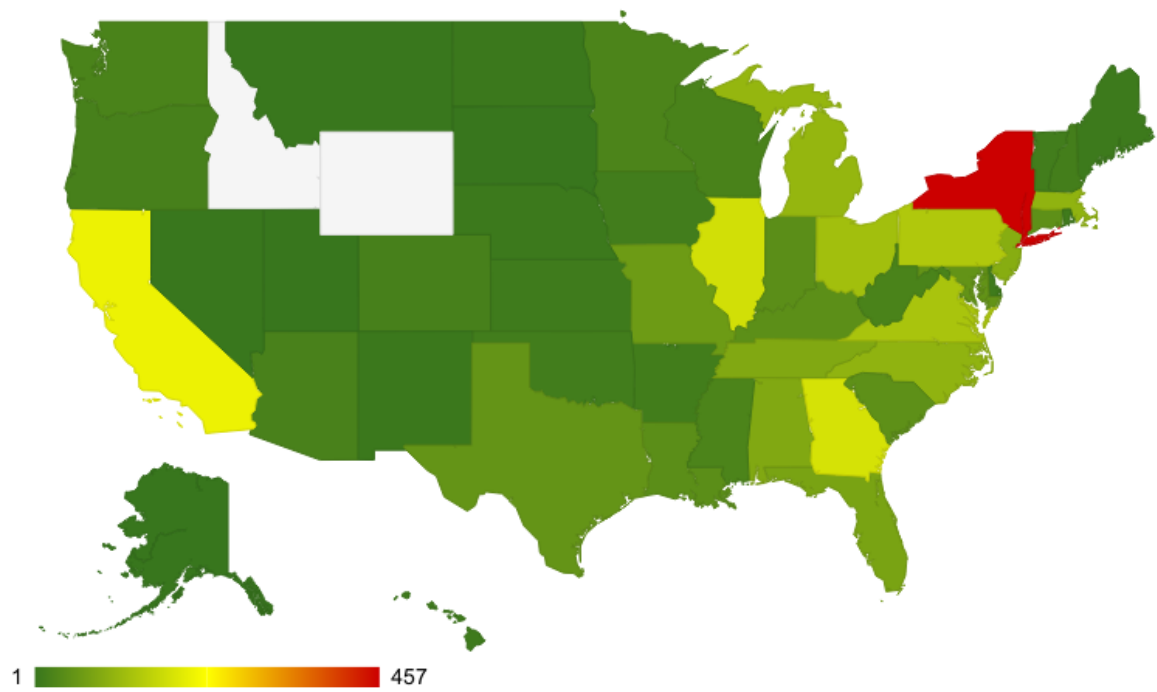


Figure 18. Location of Subscriber by U.S. State, Heat Map

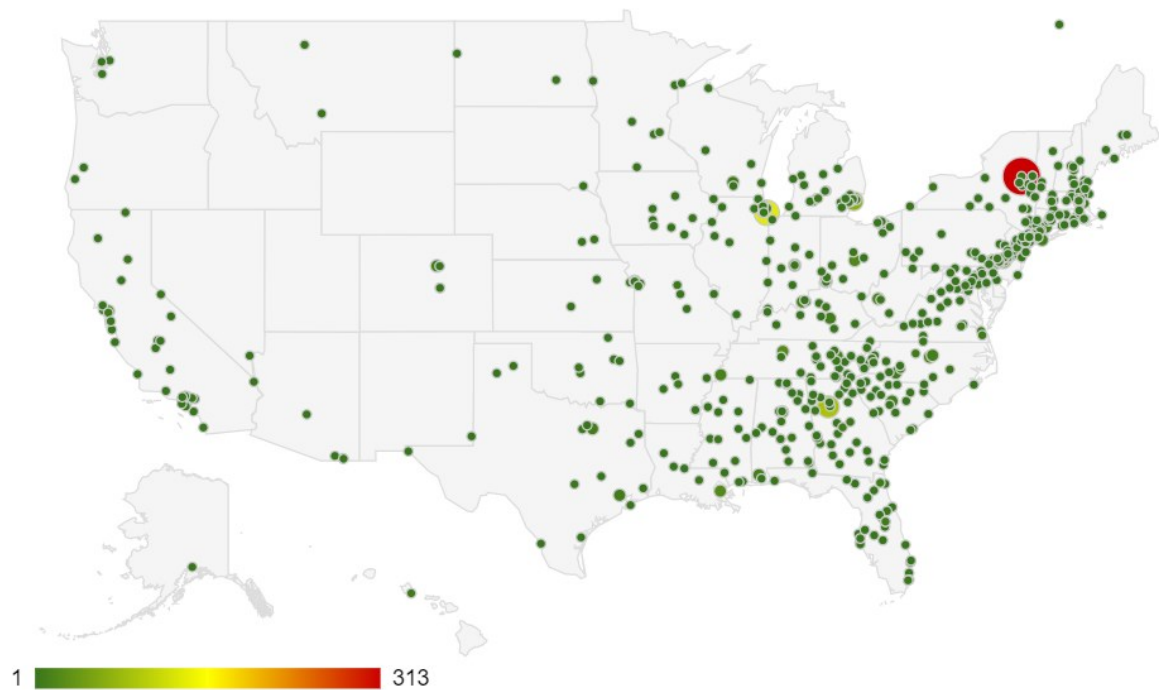


Figure 19. Location of Subscriber by U.S. City

### The Faces Behind the Data

I conclude this section with a photographic collage of some of the subscribers of *South Today* as a reminder that behind these somewhat impersonal statistics were real human beings who lived complex and intersectional lives. These portraits affirm and convey the diversity of subscribers in terms of gender, racialization, age, education level, and occupation. While most of these people would have been strangers who lived in different locations and led different lives, I included these photographs to represent their shared commonality of subscribing to *South Today* in 1944. With these faces in mind, I now turn to the voices of the readers themselves, both on the page and in the archive, to consider the various ways readers participated and how they perceived their role in the magazine's work.



Figure 20. Photograph Collage of Some of *South Today*'s Subscribers<sup>68</sup>

### Readers as Active Participants

Having gained some insight into the demographics and lived experiences of the individuals who subscribed to *South Today*, we are now in a better position to speculate as to why they might have been reading the magazine, their motivations for subscribing, how they were reading, and the extent to which they were actively participating in the magazine's work. Referencing a combination of the above data and textual evidence

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<sup>68</sup> These photographs reflect a sampling of *South Today*'s 1944–1945 subscribers. The subscribers featured are primarily those who attended a post-secondary institution. All photographs were located on *Ancestry*. A complete list of individuals pictured here is available in my thesis: Butchart, "The Literary Activism," 235-236.



from the magazine and its archives, I suggest that reader engagement played a key role in the circulation and direction of *South Today*'s activism. As a white-edited interracial magazine focused heavily on educating white audiences in anti-racism, the editorial address was often explicitly directed at "Southerners" and "white Southerners" in ways that both called out and called in. As an example of this "calling out," Smith writes in one article:

It is not hard to understand the dynamics of the ideology cherished by these economic powers ... their never-ceasing attempts to keep White Supremacy on its southern pedestal. The hard thing to see is why the rest of us white folks have so eagerly or so docilely followed the planter-industrialist-banker-demagogue line. What is there in it for us? ... Why do we, the majority of the region, demonstrate stronger allegiance to the few economic and political power-groups among us than to our own interest and our own ideals? ... Why does organized white labor fight the Negro when only by combining forces can either be strong enough to win bread and meat and a decent way of working and living?<sup>69</sup>

Likewise, as an example of "calling in," Smith's article "Addressed to Intelligent White Southerners: There Are Things To Do" offers a series of action items outlining how white people can contribute to the dismantling of whiteness and show solidarity with African Americans fighting for racial justice. In this article, the hailing of "white southerners" is designed to confront white readers about their passivity and serve as a call to action. This explicit address toward a white audience sets *South Today* apart from many of the other interracial anti-segregationist publications of the time, which were mostly Black-edited and, as W. E. B. Du Bois describes the interracial journal *Phylon*, "proceed[ed] from the point of view and the experience of the black folk where we live and

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<sup>69</sup> Lillian Smith, "Buying a New World with Old Confederate Bills," *South Today* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1942-43): 18.

work.”<sup>70</sup> Therefore, while *South Today*’s address fulfilled a niche within anti-segregationist publications, this frequent mode of address implies that it constructed a specific imagined audience to the exclusion of what we know to be a far more diverse readership. I suggest that in considering why readers (and particularly those who were not white or Southern) were reading, we would need to consider how solidarity, support, education, validation, reading across difference, and community were all possible additional reasons subscribers were interested in the magazine.

### **Discursive Participation**

Regarding how *South Today* subscribers were reading, an interesting feature that emerges from this data is the high level of readerly participation. While I do not wish to make the claim that this was any higher or lower than for other little magazines without comparative data, *South Today*’s reader articulations of its counterpublic and the ways they participated do seem to diverge at least from other more academic and non-grassroots funded journals, such as the *Southern Review* and even *Phylon*.<sup>71</sup> More specifically, this participation appears closely connected to the magazine’s activism. Forums, quiz contests, and “They Say About Us” pages were all ways readers participated on the page, with 540 readers published in these spaces over the course of the magazine’s run. Readers were also highly active correspondents in ways not always reflected within the magazine’s pages; for example, the University of Florida archives hold eleven boxes of reader correspondence primarily from the final year of *South Today*, demonstrating a sizable volume of reader correspondence.

Within the reader correspondence, we see that many readers wrote to the editors about the articles they liked or disliked, made suggestions for content, and offered general feedback. Through such discursive

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<sup>70</sup> For example, the Black-edited little magazine *Negro Story* (1944–1946) was an interracial anti-segregationist publication which featured mostly Black contributors and addressed a Black readership. See Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 138. See also W. E. B. Du Bois, “Apology,” *Phylon* 1, no. 1 (1940): 4.

<sup>71</sup> These journals had no spaces where readers could write in or participate on the page.

participation on and off the page, readers pushed the magazine to be more inclusive, thereby influencing its discursive politics. For example, in the Winter 1939–1940 issue, sociologist and reader Guy B. Johnson wrote in to suggest that the magazine’s name, which was *The North Georgia Review* at the time, was too narrowly regional and did not accurately reflect the magazine’s broad interests and diverse readership. Johnson writes, “I’ve been enjoying the NGR and want to see it go. Some day why not bring up the question of giving it an All-South name of some sort and try to make it the long-awaited Southern Journal?”<sup>72</sup> In the spring of 1942, this suggestion was adopted, and the magazine was renamed *South Today*. This comment illustrates how readers had input into the magazine’s direction and the kind of community that was forming around it, and it also offers some insight into how *South Today*’s readers and editors perceived the interrelations of imagined and real communities. Johnson’s proposal suggested that a more inclusive imagined community through a proposed change in the magazine’s name—one that better captured the periodical’s work and who he imagined its readership to be—constituted a broadening of address which could potentially reflect, solicit, and achieve a broader readership in turn.

A similar instance of how Smith and Snelling were heeding this advice is evident in the shift between the early “They Say About Us” pages, which almost exclusively collected the testimonies of prominent writers and activists, and those of later issues, which tended to feature testimonies of ordinary readers anonymized through initials (Spring-Summer 1944) or identity descriptors such as “A teacher in Mississippi” or “A soldier in Italy” (Winter 1944–45). This shift toward a more diverse representation of readers on the page speaks to Smith and Snelling’s evolving awareness of the kind of counterpublic they wanted to (re)present.

Another instance of reader participation aimed at making the magazine more inclusive occurred when subscriber Fred Shaw of New Mexico State

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<sup>72</sup> Guy B. Johnson, “They Have Said About Us: ‘I’ve been enjoying the NGR ...’” *The North Georgia Review: A Magazine of the Southern Regions* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1939–40): inside front cover.

College criticized Smith and Snelling for employing too much academic theory to the detriment of reader accessibility. His statement, as published in *South Today*, reads: “there are occasional suggestions that there are all sorts of cloudy and mysterious mumbo jumbo going on under the surface of life that only you and Freud and a couple of Tar Heel sociologists are wise to.”<sup>73</sup> Despite the choice of language, this statement might be read as a critique of the elitism inherent in assuming a reader’s familiarity with psychoanalysis and sociology. While many subscribers were highly educated (see Figure 12), a significant portion would likely not have been familiar with psychoanalytic theory. Smith addressed this reader criticism later in the issue in the article “Buying A New World With Old Confederate Bills,” writing in an aside: “(We suggest this [psychoanalytic] explanation with hesitancy, knowing it will be distasteful and puzzling to many readers who either are not familiar with the literature of psychoanalysis, which sheds such illuminating light on our childhood loves and hates, or else reject it as being too crude and base for human beings to have traffic with. But since we are having traffic today with mass killings and lynchings and race hate, perhaps it is relevant to seek out the roots of some of these flowerings of our times).”<sup>74</sup> Therefore, while Smith and other contributors continued to apply these theories, she addressed Fred Shaw’s concern by justifying the relevance of psychoanalysis to analyses of the South and using contextualizing footnotes in the articles to make such theories more accessible to the general reader. In this way, readers were able to shape and refine editor and contributor content to make *South Today* more accessible to its readership.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Fred Shaw, “They Say: ‘I have become Southwestern drummer for SOUTH TODAY ...’” *South Today* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1942–43): n.p.

<sup>74</sup> Smith, “Buying a New World,” 26–7. Smith and Snelling were very interested in psychoanalysis, particularly the works of Sigmund Freud and Karl Menninger, and often wrote about the psychology of segregation and white supremacy in *South Today*. See Paula Snelling, “Southern Fiction and Chronic Suicide,” *The North Georgia Review: A Magazine of the Southern Regions* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1938): 3–6, 24–28.

<sup>75</sup> I only considered reader critiques printed in the magazine; however, a fuller analysis of reader criticism might include unpublished subscriber correspondence and the extent to which feedback was ignored or adopted.

## Non-Discursive Participation

Non-discursive forms of reader participation are often less visible due to lack of documentation but were nevertheless critical in sustaining *South Today*. Perhaps one of the most common forms of this participation was purchasing a subscription—whether regular, active, sustaining, or gift—to the magazine. Subscriptions signal both a symbolic and material commitment or “membership” to the *South Today* counterpublic. Certainly, there are possibly a variety of reasons people subscribed that did not necessarily signal political solidarity (including surveillance); conversely, many regretted being unable to subscribe, usually for financial reasons, as in the case of C. H. of New Orleans, who wrote in the spring of 1943, “I have read the winter *South Today* with great interest. I would like to subscribe, but as I have passed the 71st milestone of life and am jobless at present, it is impossible for me to do so.”<sup>76</sup> But for the most part, subscribing does indicate some level of investment in this counterpublic, and in some cases, a financially difficult investment that was made nonetheless (see Figure 15).

These forms of financial and circulatory participation were fundamental to the magazine’s growth and survival, particularly because *South Today* did not sell advertising space within its pages and was primarily funded out-of-pocket by Smith and Snelling.<sup>77</sup> One hundred subscribers were active (\$5 subscription) or sustaining (\$10 or more) members who generated almost \$700 toward production costs in the magazine’s final year.<sup>78</sup> Even those who could not contribute financially participated in other critical ways. To keep under the radar of white supremacists and state officials as much as possible, *South Today* did not publicly advertise. Therefore, the magazine’s editors attempted to increase circulation by reprinting articles

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<sup>76</sup> C. H., “People Write Us: ‘I have read the winter *South Today* with great interest ...’” *South Today* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1943): 47–8.

<sup>77</sup> *South Today* featured eight advertisements throughout its entire run. The ads were for a local bookshop in Clayton, Georgia, the magazines *The Crisis* and *The New Republic*, and Smith’s debut novel *Strange Fruit*. It is not known whether the magazine received any revenue from these ads.

<sup>78</sup> “Account Book.” Lillian Eugenia Smith Papers (ms1283a), Box 94, Folder 13. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia Libraries.

in pamphlets, allowing reprints in other activist magazines, sending complimentary copies to activists and teachers, and reaching out to sympathetic bookstores to sell single issues. Considering these limited marketing methods, “word of mouth” among the magazine’s readership played an important role in increasing circulation. As is evident from their correspondence, readers clearly felt an active desire to share and promote *South Today* in their circles and among people they likely felt would align with the magazine’s politics. While many instances of readerly circulation go undocumented, in their letters, subscribers often shared who first introduced them to the magazine and how they, too, subsequently circulated *South Today* among their friends, family, and co-workers. As T. L. of New York wrote, “A week ago a co-worker gave me a copy of *South Today* to read ... This letter is a result of the impression it made upon me. I, along with four of my friends, hereby subscribe to your publication. It may interest you to know that the five of us are Negroes, interested in bringing about a better understanding between the races in an intelligent manner. We appreciate and support your effort.”<sup>79</sup> Likewise, Mrs. Grace T. Hamilton of Atlanta, Georgia wrote, “It gives me great satisfaction to be able to introduce *South Today* to people, in other parts of the country, who want to know ‘what can be done’ and who need to catch a glimpse of Southern convictions clearly and courageously stated.”<sup>80</sup>

The gifting of subscriptions was also an essential form of non-discursive reader participation that greatly increased circulation. At least 24% of *South Today*’s subscribers in 1944–1945 were gifted a subscription by another reader (see Figures 21 and 22). The gift subscription, included as a perforated card within the magazine’s pages, was another avenue for creating a discursive and real counterpublic. Subscribers could purchase subscriptions for friends and family or send money with the request that

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<sup>79</sup> T. L., “People Write Us: ‘I honor you because of your courage ...’” *South Today* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1943): 52.

<sup>80</sup> Mrs. Grace T. Hamilton, “It gives me great satisfaction ...” Lillian Smith Papers, Series 2: The South Today—Correspondence and Records, General Correspondence, Box 10, Folder 19, “Advertising Copy, 1942–1944.” Literary Manuscripts Collection, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

a gift subscription be given where needed. In this way, gift subscriptions connected readers (who were sometimes strangers) laterally. These grassroots methods of circulation may explain the wide geography of *South Today*'s subscribers, as seen in Figures 18 and 19. This growth in circulation through gift subscriptions is also likely higher than my figures indicate, as these post-1944 records do not document those subscribers who had previously received gift subscriptions and, consequently, do not reveal which subscribers began reading the magazine in this way and ultimately renewed their subscription or bought gift subscriptions for others in turn. Therefore, while purchasing a subscription signals one level of readerly commitment, sharing the magazine with others or purchasing gift subscriptions indicates that readers were actively constructing *South Today*'s readership and circulation.

I enclose \$ 4.00

Please send the **South Today** for one year. I would like:

regular subscription \$1.00       Active subscription \$5.00

Sustaining subscription \$10.00 - \$25.00

(**South Today** is very understaffed. Please do not ask us to bill you.)  
-35513085

Name: Cpl. Abe Vinik, Co E, 3<sup>rd</sup> E. Civ. Aff. Regt

Address: Det. D7E3 APO 658 7/8 PM, New York,  
N.Y.

**South Today**  
Clayton, Ga.

CLAYTON, GA. SEP 13 1944

D.B. 4.00  
Sent 8/1  
Ack.  
Note (Belt)  
Ent. 9-16-44

Figure 21. *Subscription Correspondence (1 of 2)*. Lillian Smith Papers, Box 18, Folder 3, "1944 [no date]." Courtesy of the Literary Manuscripts Collection, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.



Please send gift subscriptions at \$1.00 each to the following, giving my name as donor.

1. Name: Nellie Gustafson, Box 479, Charlotte  
Address: Amalie, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands

2. Name: Pfc. Edward Ryerson - 36746094, Co H, 804<sup>th</sup>  
Address: S.T.R., Camp Crowder, Mo.

3. Name: Clara Spidell  
Address: 802 Lexington Ave, New York 21, N.Y.

I enclose \$4.00 Signed: [Signature]

Figure 22. Subscription Correspondence (2 of 2). Lillian Smith Papers, Box 18, Folder 3, "1944 [no date]." Courtesy of the Literary Manuscripts Collection, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

## Conclusion

There is a need to pay greater attention to the peripheries of little literary magazines. While editors certainly play an important role in shaping a magazine, centring editorial content or decision-making, and discounting other participants both on and off the page, this can have the problematic effect of obscuring the role of readerships and peripheral supporters. In *South Today*, I see such support as foundational to the magazine's survival and activism. Rather than being passive consumers of a completed and static project, *South Today* readers were active participants, both discursively and non-discursively. By keeping the editors accountable to a politics of accessibility, supporting the magazine financially through active, sustaining and gift subscriptions, and sharing the magazine within their own circles of influence, readers shaped and perpetuated *South Today*'s activism and community focus. These forms of participation also



offered readers opportunities to build community and solidarity with contributors, activists, and other readers.

By reconstructing the historical subscribership of *South Today* between 1944 and 1945, we begin to understand the diversity of readers active in the counterpublic beyond those implied in its editorial address and visible in reader spaces on the page. Through these findings, we can begin to speculate as to what aspects of *South Today* may have appealed to readers. For some, the content of *South Today* may have been relevant to their experiences as parents, educators, Southerners (including those in a Southern diaspora), activists, etc. For others outside of these addressed groups, subscribing may have been an act of solidarity and support across differences of experience. Regardless of why or how readers read, the diversity of individual subscribers and their geographies illustrates that the magazine's relevance far exceeded its "imagined" audience and, therefore, offers insights into the relationship between imagined and real readerships.

Ultimately, while this data does not present a complete or definitive picture of *South Today's* readership, I hope that such data and the questions underwriting it contribute to existing scholarship on readers by showing the possibilities of combining empirical and textual methodologies. As more scholars reconstruct historical periodical readerships, there will be further opportunities to compare demographics and, perhaps, observe where similarities, differences, and overlaps in readership demographics occur. In the meantime, I hope this article contributes to our understanding of *South Today's* readership's on-and-off-the-page participation as a driving force of the magazine's community-based political activism.

#### *Author biography*

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