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Reconstructing Race, Place, and Population
Postemancipation Migrations and the Making of the Black South, 1865–1915

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ABSTRACT

Reconstructing Race, Place, and Population: Postemancipation Migrations and the Making of the Black South, 1865–1915

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This dissertation explores the African American search for belonging in the Reconstruction era from demographic and geographical perspectives, making three overlapping arguments. First, that migration within the South, rather than only from the South, was critical to the construction of a shared political identity among freedpeople. Second, that broader debates over where freedpeople belonged were central to late-nineteenth-century understandings of region, place, and citizenship in the United States; and third, that migration and its debates shaped intellectual frameworks of integration and pluralism by linking demographics and geography to the functioning of democracy.

The dissertation bridges the histories of enslavement and Reconstruction, looking back to the antebellum period rather than forward to the Great Migration to interpret freedpeople’s migrations in the Reconstruction era. Exploring on-the-ground migration, this work builds on recent literature of the internal slave trade to show how movement restructured freedpeople’s kinship and information networks, creating networks that spanned hundreds of miles. As freedpeople told each other of distant places, they forged broader political consciousnesses and created geographical frameworks explaining how space shaped the potentialities of freedom. Those geographical ideas and information networks sustained a significant internal population movement among freedpeople, as they left the eastern and upper South for the Gulf South and Mississippi Delta.
That population shift, which increased the demographic concentration of the black population in the U.S. South, eventually spawned discussions of a “population distribution” that would resettle the African American population throughout the nation as a method of socially engineering integration and, presumably, better race relations. But Booker T. Washington and others rejected the idea that becoming more fully American meant leaving the South and severing a regional identity. Ultimately, the success of freedpeople’s intra-South migrations and the related discussions of out-of-the-South migration shaped a cultural and political emphasis on black *southernness* by about 1900. By blending such stories, “Reconstructing Race, Place, and Population” demonstrates that ideas about spatial belonging and social belonging formed and shaped each other during the era of Reconstruction.
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It’s far too rare that we get to put our gratitude into formal documents, and I’m delighted to have an opportunity to recognize the people and institutions that have sustained my graduate career and have made this project possible.

My first and most immediate thanks go to Rice University, which has been my home for the last six years. Caleb McDaniel, my adviser, is a model of kindness and generosity, as well as rigor and productiveness, that I hope to emulate in my career. Caleb struck the perfect balance between giving me space to explore the topic and holding me to deadlines and expectations, and it’s hard to imagine a more rewarding adviser-advisee relationship. Randal Hall has likewise been a constant presence in my time at Rice—about ten pages of chapter 1, in fact, originated in his southern history research class during my first semester at Rice. Jim Sidbury made me want to be an Atlantic historian, but while I remained firmly in the United States, the reading and thinking I did in Jim’s classes deeply informed the questions and perspectives that shaped this dissertation. Caleb, Randal, and Jim made me a historian, and I hope that strikes them as the high praise I intend it to be.

I owe thanks to many others at Rice. Nicole Waligora-Davis supported this project from the first time we met. More important, she introduced me to Sutton E. Griggs, for which I’m eternally grateful. The Journal of Southern History has anchored my time at Rice, from serving as an editorial assistant during coursework to providing me sixth-year funding for serving as the visiting assistant editor. Bethany L. Johnson is an amazing editor, and it has been humbling and enlightening to learn so much from her this year. With any luck, I’ll forever remember correct usage of in behalf and on behalf.
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My thanks, of course, extend back before my time at Rice. Anne Twitty advised my master’s work at the University of Mississippi. She pushed me to be a better writer and thinker, and I never would have applied to Rice without Anne’s encouragement and support. I also had the pleasure of taking courses at Mississippi with Deirdre Cooper Owens, Elizabeth Payne, Ted Ownby, Marc Lerner, Angela Jill Cooley, and Lester Field. That first year of master’s coursework was hard: I felt out of my depth and far from home, but the friendship of John Lindbeck and Wes Trueblood kept me going. I’m lucky to have met those guys.
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I’ve written the following paragraphs in my head many times in the last year as I looked toward finishing the dissertation, but I know what I say here will be but a shadow of the soaring rhetoric I’ve imagined. I’ll start with an easy one: Ajax. I got Ajax as a twelve-week-old puppy three months before starting at the University of Mississippi. He’s been by my side for eight years of graduate school, a constant companion who sleeps in my office while I write and who eagerly joins me for head-clearing walks. Having a dog forced me into a healthy work-life balance and always reminded me there was more than do to than read and write, and that sometimes we just need to go to the park. Ajax is, with out a doubt, a Good Boy.

I dedicated my master’s thesis to my grandfathers, Eugene McCall and Gregory Choppin. Here, I’d like to acknowledge the debt of gratitude I owe to my grandmothers, Joyce McCall and Ann Choppin, whose love and support has nourished my soul in ways I can’t begin to measure.

My brother, Marc, has had my back since I was born. His interest in southern literature spurred my interest in southern history, and I imagine my decision to pursue history while he
pursued literature was driven by a desire—as is much of being a little brother—to emulate from a slightly adjacent point. Fortunately, however, our long chats are often about movies, synthesizers, and sci-fi novels, providing for me much-needed distance on work that can verge on all-consuming.

From the time I was a toddler and leaped off the kitchen counter yelling “catch me” at my mom (who did), to the time a couple of months before writing this when over a glass of port my dad told me (not for the first time) how proud he is of me and how much hope he has for my future, my parents have always been there for me. Much of what I value and hold dear I owe to them, and words are an insufficient register of the love and admiration I feel for my mom and dad. My dad is transitioning into retirement as I transition out of grad school this spring, a timing that I find pleasingly symmetrical, and I hope the future of travel my parents have planned is edifying and invigorating a thousand times over. They deserve it, and much more.

And finally, Ana, my wife, who has been in my life far longer than the dissertation and whose love I’m confident will endure far longer than its “interventions.” As well as being a wonderful partner, Ana is an educator and journalist whose concern for her students and interest in informing the public has often reminded me of the larger stakes of writing history. Ana has helped me become the person I want to be, and I’m eager to see where life takes us next. I love you, Ana.
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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of migrations undertaken, and those that were not. It is the story of how the persistence of a significant African American population in the U.S. South is not only a demographic legacy of slavery, but also the result of choices made, and not made, in the period of the Long Reconstruction, which I define as the half century from 1865 to 1915. The narrative I have constructed here suggests a connection between the geopolitical information networks of the internal slave trade, the search for kith and kin in the contraband camps of the Civil War era, and Booker T. Washington’s exhortation to black southerners to cast down their buckets and remain where they were. If the connection between wartime displacement and turn-of-the-century antiemigration rhetoric is less than direct, the two are at least a part of the same process: the African American search for freedom and belonging after emancipation.

This dissertation examines ideas of geography and place in the postemancipation United States by focusing on the migrations of formerly enslaved people between 1865 and 1915. Freedpeople had long understood that slavery was a place-based system and that “freedom,” too, often depended as much on place as on any other element. Since at least the 1730s, enslaved people in North America had fled their captivity by making their way from British colonies to Spanish Florida, where they were granted freedom in exchange for loyalty to the Spanish crown. By the antebellum period the direction of flight had largely shifted from the southern imperial borderlands to the northern free states or beyond, to Canada, but for many people, freedom still relied on movement and place.¹ White Americans also understood slavery as place-based, and

antislavery politicians, as historian James Oakes has argued, worked hard to cordon slavery off by restricting its geographical reach. That contest—to restrict slavery to and keep it out of the territories gained in the U.S.-Mexican War—aroused the ire of white southerners who wanted to expand the institution into the American West or beyond. Slavery’s geography was at the heart of the U.S. Civil War.

Slavery had shaped the legal, economic, cultural, and moral geography of the antebellum nation. It had kept the overwhelming majority of the U.S. black population confined to the states that made up the Confederacy in 1861. When that southern slave-based government fell to Union forces in 1865, the geography of slavery fell with it. But it was not clear to anyone what would replace it. Freedpeople had long had a politics centered on mobility and the idea that place shaped one’s status and opportunities, and they transformed the politics of fugitivity into a geopolitical theory of emancipation and freedom. Southern planters were perhaps less prepared than freedpeople to deal with the shifting geographies of emancipation, and they fretted about lost labor and their crops, having convinced themselves that only black people could handle the demands of cotton agriculture in the subtropical environment. But though freedpeople and planters had differing perspectives on the geography of freedom, all parties understood that the ground was shifting—that place and movement would significantly shape the forging of a postemancipation order.

A note on periodization: Postemancipation order, Long Reconstruction, Reconstruction era, and postwar era are the primary temporal markers I use herein, and they are often used

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2 James Oakes argues that antislavery activists held to an interpretation of the Constitution that viewed “freedom” as the default and national condition, while slavery was “local; it had no claims beyond the borders of the specific states that created it.” Oakes, Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865 (New York and London, 2013), p. 17.
interchangeably. Of the four, postwar era is the least expansive, referring mostly to the period of formal Reconstruction, from the defeat of the Confederacy in 1865 to the contested 1876 presidential election, where my focus is on emancipation and events during the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. Otherwise, when I refer to Reconstruction, I mean it expansively, and I do so for a couple of reasons. First, the traditional dating of Reconstruction’s end to 1877 presents too much of a top-down and static view. On the ground, the election of 1876 made little day-to-day difference in many places. On one hand, in many states of the former Confederacy, political Reconstruction—if defined as the period when Republican politics were ascendant in southern states—ended as early as 1872, 1873, or 1874, as Democrats retook legislatures and executive offices. On the other hand, federal troops were not immediately withdrawn from southern garrisons in 1877, lingering until 1879 or later in some locales. For these reasons, the period of formal, political Reconstruction unfolded unevenly across the South. Second, for the forms of migration that are the focus of this dissertation, 1876 made little difference: intra-South migration, the primary focus of this work, was ongoing from emancipation into the twentieth century. For out-of-the-South migration, 1879, the year of the Kansas Exodus, is much more meaningful than 1876, even if the federal turn away from political Reconstruction fed interest in emigration from the South.


The Kansas Exodus well makes the point that a history of freedpeople’s migrations requires an expansive approach to the period of Reconstruction. In 2017 literary scholar Brook Thomas defined the literature of Reconstruction as any work written between about 1865 and 1919 that “portrays the entanglement of issues raised” by the Civil War and emancipation. I agree, and the Exodus shows why following an “entanglement of issues” pushes the temporal bounds of Reconstruction. According to black southerners involved in organizing the Exodus movement, the migration that took off in 1879 began as a lot of quiet talk in the early 1870s and matured throughout the decade. Even those early whispers, as historian Steven Hahn has shown, built on community institutions—plantation councils, churches, Union Leagues—that themselves grew from relations of labor and kinship among enslaved people. So the genesis of the Exodus stretched back before emancipation, long before it ever became an actual migratory event in 1879. And though it pretty much ended in 1880, the Exodus had an afterlife that recurred in 1889 and motivated ideas and discussions well into the 1900s. Booker T. Washington, for instance, pulled on the memory of the Kansas Exodus when he told black southerners to give up ideas of emigration at the turn of the twentieth century. In following migrants and ideas of migration, this dissertation emulates the Exodus, finding its roots in the antebellum period, following its branches through the eras of emancipation and Reconstruction and into the late nineteenth century, before concluding with an examination of the ideas of Booker T. Washington in the 1910s.

Working through the many entanglements of place, movement, and belonging, this project is an attempt to write an intellectual, or conceptual, history of black migration from 1865 to 1915. It is, overall, less interested in specific streams of migration and instead seeks to understand and uncover broader political ideas and uses of demography and geography in the

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6 Brook Thomas, The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White (Baltimore, 2017), p. 27.
late-nineteenth-century United States, and how migration and geographical thinking were both the product of and central to black identity and belonging. The first two chapters, as such, work to reconstruct freedpeople’s information networks and geographical ideas. These chapters suggest, together, that freedpeople’s migrations were much less haphazard, or “chaotic” than has sometimes been described in the literature. Moreover, the primary stream of postwar black migration, from the upper and eastern South to the Mississippi Delta and the “Old Southwest,” relied on distinct and complex geographical frameworks about the relationship of environment and political potentialities or, in other words, the relationship between soil and society. The following two chapters explore wider reactions to freedpeople’s migration, focusing on the problems that observers perceived in demographic concentration in the Gulf South. As freedpeople moved to the Old Southwest, cultural commentators throughout the nation worried about the possibility that demographic shifts might create “black states.” This, they decided, was opposed to democracy and assimilation, so politicians white and black began to consider how a redistribution of the black population might lead the nation toward a homogeneous body politic.

Specific streams of migration, particularly out of the South, have garnered the lion’s share of historians’ attention. Yet until the second decade of the twentieth century, far more

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7 Carter G. Woodson described postemancipation migrations as “confusing movements,” while Leon Litwack referred to such migrants as people seeking “unknown alternatives,” suggesting their movements were based on displacement, trauma, and a lack of information. See Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration* (Washington, D.C., 1918), chap. 6, and Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), p. 304.

freedpeople and their descendants moved about within the U.S. South than moved out of it. This movement, moreover, was not primarily the result of labor recruitment, as has often been the general impression. Instead, much of it relied on and in turn constructed long distance information and kinship networks among freedpeople. Moreover, migration within the South was often the result of coherent geographical ideologies of land use, natural abundance, and how the environment related to the possibilities of freedom and citizenship. Hundreds of thousands of freedpeople made their way toward the newer, less farmed soil of the Mississippi Delta in the 1870s and 1880s. Their movements significantly shaped the region’s political trajectory and, for a time, seemed to portend a dramatic reshaping of the postwar nation’s political geography. That movement, too, inaugurated drawn out consideration of the way demographic concentration, and the voting blocs it created, presented a challenge to representation, democracy, and integration. Postwar black migration, in a very material sense, shaped the nation’s body politic.

Demography, geography, race, and politics have been closely but not always obviously intertwined in American history. By untangling those topics in relation to post–Civil War black migration, this project contributes to the study of the spatial history of slavery and emancipation. American slavery, as historian Stephanie M. H. Camp has shown, was a system of “containment” that kept black bodies confined in the U.S. South. Camp suggested that studies of emancipation and Reconstruction should focus on the struggle to “disentangle blackness from captivity” and to redefine the relationship between race and place. My project answers Camp’s call by taking, as

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9 The debate over whether sharecropping amounted to debt peonage that immobilized southern labor has shaped this interpretation, as the emphasis on labor recruitment has demonstrated that labor was not immobilized. For a discussion of labor recruitment, see William Cohen, *At Freedom’s Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861–1915* (Baton Rouge, 1991), pp. 109-37.
its central premise, the contention that the changing geographical place of the black population within the United States was a central question for the postwar nation.

The increasingly sophisticated historiography of the internal slave trade has emphasized the relevance of place and geography in the study of slavery. Indeed, as geographers Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich and Catherine Trundle argue, “Migration is only possible in reference to place.”11 I would add the corollary: place is defined by the possibility of movement. Over the past few decades, historians such as Walter Johnson, Heather Andrea Williams, Calvin Schermerhorn, Damian Alan Pargas, and Anthony E. Kaye have pointed to the internal slave trade as the defining feature of antebellum slavery, seeing the trade and the experience of forced migration as central to the structure of enslaved communities, the emotional and cultural history of enslavement, antislavery politics (of both enslaved people and northern abolitionist), and the political economy of the United States.12 The study of the internal slave trade has also turned attention to the geographical and spatial aspects of antebellum slavery, placing an emphasis on geography as a central means of enslaved people’s ways of knowing the world and on enslavers’ means of coercion and control.13 But while the emphasis on the internal slave trade has reshaped

13 For the provenance of place and movement in enslaved people’s worldviews, see Phillip Troutman, “Grapevine in the Slave Market: African American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 Creole Revolt,” in The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas ed. by Walter Johnson (New Haven and London, 2004), chap. 9; Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance (Urbana
interpretations of antebellum U.S. slavery by turning attention to place and movement, it has yet to significantly impact the historiography of emancipation and Reconstruction. As with the traditional periodization of Reconstruction, the artificial decoupling of slavery and emancipation limits more than it enlightens, obscuring important continuities between ante- and postbellum histories.

The gap between the histories of enslavement and those of emancipation and freedom has contributed to an interpretation of freedpeople as apolitical, or even as “stunned, hungry, tired” figures who haunt the postemancipation landscape. Such characterizations of freedpeople have structured interpretations that highlight “chaos” and “confusion” as the organizing principles of black southerners’ postwar movements. Paying attention to enslaved people’s histories of mobility, information networks, and geopolitical knowledge suggests quite a different interpretation of postwar migrations, emphasizing freedpeople’s cosmopolitan outlooks and their connections to distant places and distant people. To be sure, slavery circumscribed enslaved people’s movements and limited their horizons, but it also taught important lessons about the relationship of place, movement, and freedom. Those lessons shaped the history of Reconstruction, as freedpeople took more and more control over their information and kinship networks, which, in turn, increased their ability to, as historian Phillip Troutman puts it, “write” upon their landscapes. In drawing on the analytical insights of the study of forced migration and the spatial history of slavery, I argue that geographical thinking remained central to how freedpeople understood their world and gave meaning to freedom. Put simply, the antebellum

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16 A renewed interest in freedpeople’s migrations has recently brought forth new approaches and new insights. Perhaps these works represent an emerging focus on the spatial history of emancipation. See for instance, Scott
ideas and worldviews of both enslaved people and their enslavers shaped both the history of postwar migration and the interpretations and debates about that migration.

The dissertation comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 uses census records, WPA ex-slave narratives, and formerly enslaved people’s autobiographies to explore how migration was shaped by, and in turn shaped, black communities, households, and political identities. Focusing on migration reveals a postwar South in motion: in addition to a steady stream of freedpeople heading toward the Southwest, there was a high degree of permanent return migration, temporary “visiting,” and letter writing among kith and kin. Expanding Phillip Troutman’s work on enslaved people’s “grapevine telegraph” and their geopolitical ideologies, I argue that migration created information networks that knitted far flung communities together and helped shape the routes and destinations of individual freedpeople’s migrations. These information networks also held a latent political power. As migration expanded freedpeople’s kinship networks and information sources, it also expanded their political consciousnesses and their geopolitical horizons. As families and communities adapted to postwar migration, they therefore gave rise to networks of consciousness and identity that advanced late-nineteenth-century black political activism.

Chapter 2 turns from the intimate scale of household and community to focus on black migration to Arkansas between 1865 and 1890, exploring the geographical theories and political institutions that supported intra-South migration. This chapter uses colored convention


17 Troutman, “Grapevine in the Slave Market.”
proceedings, newspapers, Arkansas state congressional records, and slave narratives to
demonstrate how political and geographical frameworks established during slavery continued to
shape understandings of freedom and citizenship in the postemancipation United States, and how
these understandings suggested one answer to the central question of where freedpeople belonged.
This chapter builds on recent works by historians Kimberly K. Smith and Adam Wesley Dean that
posit enslaved people developed an “agrarian” or “ecological” critique of slavery as a system of
land use. This critique held that slavery was destroying the land and suggested a strong link
between the state of the environment and the health of society: degraded landscapes produced
degraded societies with limited political potentialities. My research demonstrates that this
environmental critique remained central to black political thinking after emancipation.

Pro-immigration black leaders in Arkansas used the idea of worn-out soil in older slave
states to draw attention to Arkansas’s fertile alluvial soils. These leaders promoted the idea that
the environmental conditions in Arkansas would provide a solid material foundation on which to
build an integrated body politic. Their message resonated widely with freedpeople in older
eastern states, and sources reveal that ideas of soil health and natural abundance motivated many
freedpeople to migrate to Arkansas. This chapter demonstrates how formerly enslaved people’s
political ideologies and geographical knowledge shaped a theory of freedom based on movement
and environment. It also shows that, for Reconstruction-era black leaders in Arkansas,
immigration was a central component of postwar state-building and political activism.

While black leaders in Arkansas and migrants who made their way to the state saw
geography and movement as a primary way of making freedom meaningful, white planters,

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18 Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Though: Foundations* (Lawrence, Kans., 2007); Adam
Wesley Dean, *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* (Chapel
Hill, 2015).
politicians, and commentators interpreted freedpeople’s migrations as a threat to the nation’s racial and agricultural geographies. These opposing viewpoints are the focus of chapter 3, which draws on extensive local and national press coverage of postwar black migration. Reconfiguring proslavery arguments about race and climate, postbellum racial theorists argued that freedpeople were seeking tropical climates where, they feared, the resulting demographic concentration of freedpeople in the Gulf South would create a de facto black republic spanning the region’s most fertile lands. Ultimately, concerns about black migration spurred a short-lived effort to create a white ethno-state out of northern Mississippi, western Tennessee, and southern Kentucky in 1873. This chapter contends that this state movement was an inversion of the emancipation-era domestic colonization schemes that historians Nicholas Guyatt and Ikuko Asaka have explored, but I emphasize that this was a movement brought about by freedpeople’s mobility rather than by the politicking of white Republicans.19 I argue that intra-South migration rewrote the nation’s racial geography in the decade after emancipation, both deepening the demographic concentration of African Americans in the U.S. South and shifting the geographical disposition of cotton agriculture. Studying this migration and the 1873 state movement reveals the contingency of the era before “redemption,” as southern politicians considered redrawing state borders to retain their political power in the face of freedpeople’s autonomy.

The concern about demographic concentration in the “black belt” continued even after the aborted state movement of the mid-1870s, eventually incorporating critiques by white Republicans and African American leaders. Discerning that freedpeople’s concentration in the

Deep South was increasing the amount of racial violence and extra-legal disenfranchisement, Republicans and black leaders began to call instead for a population redistribution. Chapter 4 uses convention proceedings and congressional records to trace these debates over the course of the late nineteenth century. The Kansas Exodus, which has typically been studied for what it reveals about black political activism and grassroots organizing, hinged on ideas of population distribution. Though the movement started on its own, the result of years of discussion and planning among southern freedpeople who thought emigration from the South might produce a more equitable future, Republican senator William Windom coopted the Exodus and attempted to turn it into a program to redistribute the southern black population throughout the nation. Windom’s scheme failed, and the Exodus petered out in 1880, having seen only about twenty thousand people leave the South for elsewhere. Chapter 4 thus reinterprets the Exodus as a population distribution program rather than a colonization movement to explore ideas of demography and geography as related to the so-called race problems and ideas of sectionalism in the Reconstruction era.

Ideas of population distribution circulated through black newspapers and institutions (including their appearance as a plank in the constitution of the Afro-American League) and made their way back into the U.S. Senate in 1890. Proponents of population distribution schemes thought that it would be easier to integrate freedpeople and their descendants into the U.S. body politic if the black population were more evenly distributed among the states. I argue these schemes were in fact attempts at using the expanding power of the federal state to socially engineer a postbellum multiracial body politic, and they reveal the national scope of ideas that linked African Americans’ geographical place to their social place in the Reconstruction era.
Finally, chapter 5 steps away from actual on-the-ground migration and debates about the postwar nation’s racial demography and geography to explore African American cultural productions centering on migration and place between 1880 and 1915. Against the backdrop of the earliest movements of the Great Migration, chapter 5 considers black literature and political activism to explore the tension between the emerging narrative trope of migration and the emerging political and cultural identity of black *southerners*. Booker T. Washington led an antiemigration movement in these years, speaking out against both foreign colonization and internal distribution schemes. Indeed, when he told African Americans to “cast down” their buckets in 1895, Washington was calling on them explicitly to reject emigration and to, instead, commit themselves to southern belonging. This chapter engages works by Washington, Sutton E. Griggs, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the biography of Arkansas farmer Scott Bond to see how migration, as a trope and an idea, allowed people to at once critique the South and to lay claim to it. The writers and works explored in this chapter critically examined ideas, hopes, and expectations associated with emigration from the South to imagine and create a geography of belonging, even as they recognized that Jim Crow and the Great Migration made their task especially fraught. They, like the thousands of freedpeople who moved about in the decades following the Civil War, were committed to the search for belonging in the postemancipation United States.²⁰

CHAPTER 1
“All Will Prove Efficient Emigration Missionaries”
Freedpeople’s Migrations and Geopolitical Networks in the Postwar South

For Louis Hughes, becoming free required movement and knowledge. He and his wife had been enslaved on a plantation in northern Mississippi, and though the bonds of slavery tightened during the Civil War, on his fifth try, in June 1865, Hughes was able to escape to a nearby Union camp. Once there he employed a couple of U.S. soldiers to accompany him back to the plantation, where he gathered his wife and other kinfolk under the gaze of his former owner. Making their way back to the Union encampment, the group crossed an unexpectedly deep stream, and as the water rose around them, the stream took on metaphorical implications. “Indeed,” wrote Hughes, “it seemed like a baptism by immersion.”¹ But despite their symbolic soaking and subsequent arrival at the relative safety of a Union encampment, for Hughes and his wife, the requisite conditions to ensure freedom had not yet been obtained. Becoming free required still more movement.

They headed first to Memphis, where they found that “Thousands of others, in search of the freedom of which they had so long dreamed, flocked into the city of refuge, some having walked hundreds of miles.”² Memphis was crowded with refugees and swirling with news of distant people and places. While there Hughes learned that his wife’s mother might be in Cincinnati, so they left Memphis and headed to Ohio. They found their kinfolk in Cincinnati, but place, and not just proximity to kith and kin, marked freedom in the age of emancipation. From Cincinnati, they aimed to make it to Canada, which they “regarded…as the safest place for

¹ Louis Hughes, Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom. The Institution of Slavery as Seen on the Plantation and in the Home of the Planter (Milwaukee, 1897), p. 185.
² Hughes, Thirty Years a Slave, p. 187.
refugees from slavery. [They] did not know what might come again for [their] injury.”

Hughes had good reason to dwell on the insecurity of legal freedom: he and his family had been putatively freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and by the time of his successful escape attempt in June 1865, Confederate forces had surrendered. Yet for enslaved people under the power of local slaveowners, few of those legal or political developments mattered. So even in the free state of Ohio, freedom felt tenuous for the Hugheses.

After arriving in Canada on Christmas day, 1865, mobility and geography continued to shape Hughes’s postemancipation life. He left his family in Canada, found work on a steamboat on Lake Michigan, then attended school in Chicago, and eventually moved his family to Milwaukee. Years later, based on knowledge carried by riverine information networks, Hughes reunited with a long-lost brother in Cleveland. His brother, too, had moved about since emancipation, searching for their mother in Virginia before making his way to Cleveland. Finding his brother had a powerful impact on Louis, but his peregrinations were not over. In the 1870s, Hughes took a trip to New Orleans, during which he passed through his old slave neighborhood in Mississippi. The trip was an opportunity for Hughes to notice how freedom changed places. “I could remember the appearance of the cotton farms in slavery days,” he noted, “but how changed were things I now saw!”

Hughes’s narrative blends the geographical with the political: slavery had restricted his movement, and so emancipation became a process of moving about, putting his kinship network together, finding a place where freedom felt secure, and then searching for a place of permanency and belonging. And in this, Louis Hughes and his family were not alone, for

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3 Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, p. 195.
4 Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, p. 207.
emancipation inaugurated a drawn-out process of migration and place-making. Becoming free was every bit as geographical as it was political, and finding a place of belonging in the body politic was a struggle both spatial and social. This chapter follows the threads of stories like that of Louis Hughes, tracing the ways freedpeople moved about and how such movements reconfigured their communities and shaped their ideas of freedom and belonging.

Historian Phillip Troutman has studied how enslaved people built a politics around geographical knowledge and the so-called “grapevine” communication network. His work focuses specifically on the 1841 Creole revolt in which enslaved people en route to New Orleans slave markets commandeered the vessel and forced its crew to sail to the Bahamas, where they knew British law would help them achieve freedom. He argues that the success of the revolt relied upon clandestine information networks in which enslaved people exchanged knowledge about the wider world, in this case knowledge about a previous group of enslaved people who were freed by local officials when their ship took refuge in the Bahamas during a storm. Troutman’s analysis of the Creole revolt suggests the most subversive and dangerous type of knowledge the grapevine carried was geographical. As Troutman writes, the grapevine “represented a mode of gathering and transfer of knowledge about the abstract but quite real boundaries that defined legal slavery and freedom in the Americas.”

5 Phillip Troutman, “Grapevine in the Slave Market: African American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 Creole Revolt,” in The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas ed. by Walter Johnson (New Haven and London, 2004), p. 206. Troutman, of course, is not the first to write about enslaved people’s clandestine forms of communication. The term “grapevine” was used by formerly enslaved people, and it has long been recognized as a part of the world the slaves made. Booker T. Washington, for instance, wrote that “Though I was a mere child during the preparation for the Civil War and during the war itself, I now recall the many late-at-night whispered discussions that I heard my mother and other slaves on the plantation indulge in. These discussions showed that they understood the situation, and that they kept themselves informed of events by what was termed the ‘grape-vine’ telegraph.” Washington, Up from Slavery: An Autobiography (New York, 1900), pp. 7-8; see also Steven Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), pp. 41-2. Troutman’s particular contribution is to examine how the grapevine was often used to exchange geopolitical information in ways that aided people’s attempts to escape slavery through flight.
American slaves who revolted on the *Creole* saw their interests as aligned with other enslaved rebels and how they were immediately aided and protected by black Bahamians, Troutman further suggests that such an exchange of political information “contributed to the formation of a broad Afro-American consciousness.” What matters here is that the grapevine carried information that linked distant people to distant places and helped enslaved people imagine a wider world full of potential allies.

Troutman calls this “geopolitical literacy,” and he makes an important distinction between enslaved people’s ability to “read” a landscape and their ability to “write” upon that landscape. Through shared experiences of forced migration and through learning to view power as a geographical imperative, many enslaved people could “read” their geopolitical landscape. They developed conceptual maps depicting at least the general contours of slavery and freedom. Far fewer enslaved people could employ those conceptual maps in ways that subverted slavery or allowed them to escape. Bondspeople carried this slave-based geopolitical knowledge into emancipation, and both the information networks represented by the grapevine and the geographical knowledge gained from the experience of forced migration through the slave trade and from the experience of fugitivity provided freedpeople’s foundational geopolitical knowledge.

As the Civil War and emancipation eroded the geography of containment that slavery relied upon, and as the geopolitical landscape shifted, enslaved and freed people could more easily employ geographical knowledge and personal mobility in their struggles for social and

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Successfully fleeing slavery, Troutman shows, relied on mobility *and* knowledge, and the grapevine was the mechanism through which that knowledge circulated.

6 Troutman, “Grapevine in the Slave Market,” pp. 207, 215-16. Troutman argues that “Physical migration and grapevine communications were key to that sense of shared identity.” (208).
spatial power.\(^7\) To put it in Troutman’s terms, with emancipation, formerly enslaved people began to more broadly acquire the ability to write upon their landscape, and their grapevine networks likewise expanded. With emancipation came a struggle to employ geopolitical literacy in an effort to literally define and defend a place of belonging. This struggle both relied upon and precipitated an evolution of the enslaved grapevine into a widespread network of geographical information made possible by mobile freedpeople. Emancipation brought about an expansion of geographical knowledge that shaped a broader political consciousness among freedpeople.

This chapter explores how the “grapevine” expanded with emancipation, tracing the ways freedpeople’s mobility created information networks that sustained and enlarged postwar black migration. First the chapter focuses on the Civil War and its immediate aftermath, exploring how contraband camps and the Union army functioned as sites where disparate freedpeople exchanged geographical information, came into contact with new geographical powers, and forged new networks of community and communication. For formerly enslaved people who enlisted in the army, soldiering, like life in contraband camps, connected them to a wider world. Soldiers served alongside people from distant places, and those connections sometimes created the knowledge base and understanding of distant locales that led to postwar decisions to relocate. For formerly enslaved men who enlisted later in the war and found themselves serving in the western theater after the Confederate surrender, the mobility of soldiering made legible new geographies. Having marched over new landscapes, many formerly enslaved black troops saw

\(^7\) Stephanie M. H. Camp describes slavery as a set of “laws, customs, ideals [that] had come together into a systematic constriction of slave movement that helped establish slaveholders’ sense of mastery.” She calls spatial regime the “geography of containment.” Her work explores enslaved people’s spatial tactics of resistance, and Camp argues that enslaved resistance revolved around efforts to construct a “rival geography.” Camp, Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South (Chapel Hill, 2004).
opportunities for land, jobs, and autonomy in places distant from their original homes, and turned their soldiering experience into a postwar migration.

From contraband camps and soldiering, this chapter next considers how access to mobility-based jobs shaped freedpeople’s information networks and routes of migration. Freedpeople who worked on steamboats and railroads became information conduits: mobile people not only held information about distant places, but they also carried news and information between kith and kin who were themselves less mobile. As the postwar South looked to economic expansion through building railroads and clearing western rivers for commercial navigation, freedpeople transformed those avenues of commerce into networks of communication. And just as soldiers sometimes decided to move to places they had seen while serving, freedpeople with mobile occupations often leveraged their work experience into a permanent change of place. As they relocated, moreover, they reconfigured the tendrils of their information networks.

In its third section, this chapter reconstructs the ways kinship and migration shaped each other. Historians have recently begun to focus on freedpeople’s postwar migrations as efforts to reunite families torn asunder through the slave trade or wartime displacement. But kinship structured migration in other ways, too. After emancipation, as freedpeople engaged in free migration and letter writing, kinship networks could span hundreds of miles. Far-flung kinship networks stayed in touch via correspondence and short-term visiting. These networks represented

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a way in which freedpeople had both local and distant communities, and sometimes kinship networks and the possibilities of migration created tension between local communities and the wider world. In contrast to those who left to find family members, local kinship ties sometimes militated against migration, and some freedpeople only engaged in migration once death or conflict had severed local ties. Kinship networks sustained migration in other ways, too, as when freedpeople based their decision to migrate on receiving letters written by kin who had already moved somewhere. Other times, a migrant’s visit back to their old home provided the information conduit that encouraged further emigration. Freedpeople’s information networks thus sometimes resembled and even overlapped with the networks of postwar labor recruiters. Expanded information networks were both the result and cause of postwar migration and kinship-based chain migration.

Geopolitical literacy and grapevine communication networks, forged during enslavement, were central to freedom-making in the Reconstruction era. As freedpeople exchanged geographical knowledge through letter writing and visiting, they both created and mapped the spaces and possibilities of black citizenship and belonging in the Reconstruction South. Sometimes this knowledge told people to avoid migrating to a certain area because of racial violence or poor working conditions. Other times the knowledge of better terms of labor in a distant place allowed freedpeople to use the threat of migration to negotiate for better terms locally. And through it all, as freedpeople told each other of distant places, planned migrations, and integrated into new communities, they forged a wider political consciousness through their broadened geopolitical horizons.
Contraband Camps, Military Service, and the Geography of Emancipation

The breakdown of slavery was accompanied by the expansion of geopolitical horizons. As enslaved people made their way to contrabands camps and Union lines, they mapped the dwindling space of slavery and the widening spaces of freedom. These maps informed individual and communal efforts to define and enlarge the geography of that freedom. In the camps, freedpeople often found themselves among the largest gathering of fellow bondspeople they had experienced. The intimate community of slave quarter and neighborhood gave way to larger community formations and forged new communication and information networks. As historian Abigail Cooper has argued, through such formations, these camps functioned as “location[s] of gathering, information exchange, and family connections.” Here, strangers coalesced into communities and, in so doing, helped make strange and distant places known, if also sometimes threatening. In telling each other of experiences in distant places or sharing rumors about them, wartime refugees helped fill in each other’s conceptual maps of the world. At times these information networks helped reunite families; other times they told freedpeople to avoid certain places, much to the frustration of the officials in charge of the camps. The experience of wartime refugeeism and the information networks forged at these camps expanded freedpeople’s geographical knowledge and shaped postwar migration.

Susie King Taylor, who fled enslavement for the relative safety of Union lines at St. Simon’s Island, Georgia, learned about Boston, her future home, while living in contraband

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11 Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, pp. 72-82. Hahn refers to contraband camps as “the first great cultural and political meeting grounds that the war produced. With between several hundred and several thousand contrabands at any one time, the camps brought slaves together in greater concentrations than had ever existed in the South” (73).
12 Cooper, “’Away I Goin’ to Find My Momma,’” p. 448. Cooper, whose work focuses on freedpeople and “kinship migrations” at refugee camps, estimates that during the Civil War era there were 250 such camps housing between 524,000 and 660,470 people.
camps. Taylor, who was literate, ran a school for black refugees at St. Simon’s Island, and during her tenure she occasionally yielded the podium to “Chaplain French, of Boston, [who] would come to the school, sometimes, and lecture to the pupils on Boston and the North.”¹³ Later, when she fell in as a nurse with the Thirty-Third U.S. Colored Troops, Company G, the commander, Captain Parker, “often told [her] about Massachusetts.”¹⁴ This knowledge proved useful: in the 1870s, Taylor got a job as a domestic worker with a family that traveled between homes in Savannah and Boston, and she eventually decided to remain in Boston. While the particulars of Taylor’s life as a literate and mobile freed person were unique, her experience of learning of distant places at contraband camps was not. The camps drew aid workers and missionaries from the North, who told refugees about the places they came from. Sometimes such knowledge came from even farther away, where it became more an expression of shared sentiment than practical geography. On one occasion, for instance, freedpeople in Kentucky rejoiced when they were told all about “England's sympathy for the freedmen, [and] of the money England had sent…to aid in their clothing and education.” Knowing they had friends thousands of miles away mattered to these Kentucky refugees, and they expressed “how glad they were to hear dat dey know 'bout us [on] t’other side de 'Lantic.”¹⁵ These moments, shared between white aid workers and black refugees from slavery, left their trace in the records, but they were inevitably accompanied by innumerable unrecorded conversations among freedpeople, recounting their tales of forced

¹³ Susie King Taylor, Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S.C. Volunteers (Boston, 1902), p. 11.
¹⁴ Taylor, Reminiscences of My Life in Camp, p. 43.
migration, their escapes from slavery, and trading information in the hopes of tracking down friends and family.¹⁶

But expanding geographical knowledge was not always comforting, and as horizons got larger, the geopolitics got more complicated. Freedpeople’s experiences at Camp Nelson in Kentucky demonstrate the ways geography shaped emancipation at contraband camps. Kentucky held an unusual geopolitical position during the Civil War. Though a slave state, it remained in the Union during the war, and the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to enslaved people in Kentucky because it was not territory in rebellion. Enslaved people in Kentucky thus learned to navigate this unusual geopolitical situation. Some, striking out for freedom, escaped to Confederate states, such as Tennessee, where they could claim freedom under the confiscation acts or the emancipation proclamation. Others continued to engage the antebellum method of flight to the North, often by making their way to Ohio.¹⁷ The founding of Camp Nelson in 1863, however, shifted the geography again as it introduced the federal government as a spatial power, though this development too was full of contradiction and uncertainty.

While the Emancipation Proclamation did not emancipate enslaved people in Kentucky (unless their owners were deemed “disloyal” and subject to the Second Confiscation Act), it did sanction the recruitment of black troops within the state.¹⁸ Because Camp Nelson was under the direction of the Union army, it assumed the role of a recruitment center in addition to a refugee

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¹⁶ Many refugees traded information in the hopes of finding family members separated by the slave trade or wartime displacement. See Cooper, ‘Away I Goin’ to Find My Momma”; Williams, Help Me to Find My People; and Chandra Manning, Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War (New York, 2016); Chandra Manning, “Emancipation as State Building from the Inside Out,” in Beyond Freedom: Disrupting the History of Emancipation ed. by David W. Blight and Jim Downs (Athens, 2017), pp. 60-76.


¹⁸ The Emancipation Proclamation, issued January 1, 1863, (and following the preliminary version proclaimed in September 1862) allowed for recently freed people “to be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.”
camp. As black men made their way to Camp Nelson to enlist, they brought their families with them, many of whom had been “driven off ‘from home’” when their husbands, fathers, and brothers sought to join the Union army. Upon arriving at the camp, however, the women and children were initially not treated as contrabands of war or freedpeople, and camp officials demurred in offering them safe haven. In 1864 the camp commander ordered soldiers’ families to leave the camp, which for many meant that they could neither return to their former homes for fear of violent reprisal, nor could they navigate the fraught geopolitics of border state slavery to find federally ensured freedom. The refugee women and children were left placeless, and suffered as a result. Kicked out of camp during adverse weather in November 1864, a number of refugees died of exposure. The expulsion of soldiers’ families also offered an education in the importance of state borders, as women and children from states other than Kentucky could remain in the camp. The presence of Camp Nelson, with its confusing and contradictory regulations, made free and enslaved people realize that emancipation in Kentucky had a lot to do with where you were, where you were from, where you could go, and whose power you fell within.

Eventually army officials began to offer protection and freedom to women and children to more successfully recruit black troops in Kentucky. As enlistments expanded under this

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19 Fee to Whipple, 8 Feb. 1865, AMAA 44079-82, in Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, p. 171. Many of the black soldiers who enlisted in Kentucky had fled there from neighboring Confederate states, especially Tennessee.
approach, so too did the number of formerly enslaved women and children at Camp Nelson. But
the sense of security found by such measures was relatively short lived. The army sought to shut
Camp Nelson down in late summer 1865. The efforts to close the camp introduced freedpeople
to the federal government’s postwar vision, and freedpeople’s resistance to these schemes
brought its own set of geographical issues. Because of the uncertainties of wartime
displacement, the information networks at contraband camps were particularly susceptible to
rumor. Indeed, throughout the South during and following the war, freedpeople circulated
rumors that certain transportation schemes would result in re-enslavement or even being sold in
Cuba. Thus the exchange of geographical information among freedpeople in the camps
sometimes militated against migration to certain places. At times, this misinformation served the
ends of camp officials, who had their own ideas of the proper place of freedpeople. By late 1865

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22 It is important to keep in mind that despite the measures granting freedom to the families of enlisted men, slavery
was still legal in Kentucky until the ratification of the thirteenth amendment in December 1865.
23 The federal government lurched toward a number of geographical visions of emancipation during the course of
the Civil War. Initially, many Republicans had envisioned a program of emancipation with colonization, preferring
that freedom from slavery should be accompanied with removal from the United States. Colonization ideas,
however, were opposed by black leaders such as Frederick Douglass and were abandoned as neither politically nor
practically feasible, and so a new vision took over. This one saw black labor as necessary for the production of
southern crops, and so the army and then the Freedmen’s Bureau engaged in schemes to put freedpeople to work on
southern plantations. These projects aimed to move concentrated populations that had gathered as contraband camps
and urban areas to underpopulated agricultural regions. After the war, and in conjunction with the closing of camps
like Camp Nelson, the Freedmen’s Bureau worked to redistribute freedpeople to areas of high labor demand,
operating, as suggested by William Cohen, as a government-run labor agency. Freedpeople resisted these visions of
freedom: emancipation, for many, had already entailed displacement, separation, and uncertainty, and they were not
always receptive to army or FMB resettlement policies. Having been freed from an institution that compelled their
labor and controlled their mobility, many simply may have chafed at being told where to go and what to do. See
William Cohen, At Freedom’s Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915
(Baton Rouge and London, 1991), pp. 54-7. For an overview of Republican ideas of emancipation with colonization, see
Ikuko Asaka, Tropical Freedom: Climate, Settler Colonialism, and Black Exclusion in the Age of Emancipation
(Durham and London, 2017), chap. 6. See also V. Jacque Voegeli, “A Rejected Alternative: Union Policy and the
Relocation of Southern ‘Contrabands’ at the Dawn of Emancipation,” Journal of Southern History 69.4 (Nov. 2003),
pp. 765-90.
24 For the impact of such rumors, and an exploration of their basis in reality, see Adam Rothman, Beyond Freedom’s
the freedpeople at Camp Nelson found themselves caught between competing geographical visions of emancipation.

R. E. Farwell, a special agent with the Freedmen’s Bureau assigned to oversee the process of closing the camp in summer 1865, wanted to relocate the freedpeople out of the area. Concerned about dependency on government assistance and wanting to spur ideas of self-sufficiency and free labor, Farwell hoped to send the refugees to Ohio or to points south to find work, but the refugees resisted the relocation because they feared losing track of their enlisted family members if they left Kentucky. Meanwhile, John G. Fee, a missionary and antislavery activist who had been heavily involved in the American Missionary Association’s educational and humanitarian efforts at the camp, sought to settle the camp’s freedpeople on farms in Kentucky. Fee felt the refugee families “need to be encouraged to go out into the hill country – even to the mountain counties.” He elaborated that freedpeople should not remain concentrated, however, suggesting that freedpeople should “scatter into different counties.” Abisha Scofield, an abolitionist and missionary from New York, aligned himself with Fee and advised the people at the camp “they could do better by staying in Kentucky” than by heading to plantations in the South.

With the specter of relocation for labor on southern plantations raised, however, Farwell gained a tactic in his efforts to close the camp. Playing to freedpeople’s fear of the cotton south in order to encourage settlement in Ohio, Farwell noted “the emigration idea works like a charm for I push and it creates a panic and ten go one way while one goes to Miss[issip]i.”

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26 Farwell to Fisk, 3 Jan. 1866; M999:7:407-10; RG 105, in Sears, Camp Nelson, Kentucky, p. 311.

25 Fee to Dear Bro Whipple, 30 Nov. 1865, in Sears, Camp Nelson, Kentucky, p. 299.

freedpeople caught between these competing visions, emancipation became a fraught geopolitical moment. Some asserted the primacy of family, refusing to relocate without their enlisted husbands. Though they had been “driven away from home” and had found a cold welcome at Camp Nelson, most were “averse to going out of [Kentucky].” Yet others eagerly accepted transportation to Ohio, seemingly wanting nothing to do with either Fee’s resettlement plan or work on southern plantations; those who went north, however, were forced to recognize and confront the idea that some states were more welcoming than others. Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Wisconsin, and other midwestern states had antebellum laws, still on the books, forbidding or restricting black immigration, and wartime migration to those states introduced a new geopolitics of belonging. Political contests between freedpeople and camp officials thus revolved around resistance to certain geographical imperatives and assertions of a right to claim space in other locales. Emancipation at Camp Nelson was a lesson in geopolitics, and the lesson lingered. As late as April 1866, the freedpeople gathered at the camp refused to seek labor elsewhere because of deeply held beliefs about the prospects associated with specific places, such as “The cotton fields are slave pens & Cuba is worse.” Life at contraband camps, like so much of the process

28 Abigail Cooper argues that kinship was at the basis of freedpeople’s ideas of freedom, and “embodies a version of black politics that put kin before nation as the integral foundation upon which black communities would navigate the route to citizenship.” Cooper, “‘Away I Goin’ to Find My Momma,’” p. 445.
29 Farwell to Fisk, 1 Nov. 1865; M999:7:318-23; RG 105, in Sears, Camp Nelson, Kentucky, p. 294.
30 Manning, Troubled Refuge, pp. 112-13. As the black abolitionist poet Francis Ellen Watkins Harper noted in 1860, “Indiana shuts her doors upon us. Illinois denies us admission to her prairie homes. Oregon refuses us an abiding place for the soles of our weary feet. And even Minnesota has our exclusion under consideration.” Harper, quoted in Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance (Urbana and other cities, 2013), p. 118. As late as September 1865, a white farmer in Indiana was fined ten dollars for employing a black laborer, a violation of Indiana’s prohibition against black immigration. The farmer planned to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, and there waits to be written a history of the breakdown of midwestern states’ black immigration prohibitions. Such laws were, of course, unsustainable as the Reconstruction amendments took effect in the later 1860s. Philadelphia Daily Age, Sept. 20, 1865, p. 2. See also Asaka, Tropical Freedom, chap. 6 for the intertwined logic of white free soil and black exclusion laws.
of emancipation, was at once rooted in the conflict between the lived reality of slavery and concepts of freedom, and decisions about the geopolitics of freedom were made in reference to the landscape of enslavement. ③²

Contraband camps also served as U.S. army recruitment points for black troops, and the experience of soldiering likewise greatly expanded freedpeople’s geopolitical knowledge. Enlistees, like contrabands, learned to navigate the shifting wartime geographies of slavery and freedom as they made their way to Union lines. Soldiers also shaped the spatial regime of emancipation by bringing freedom, or at least the chance to join the army, to areas where neither the confiscation acts nor the Emancipation Proclamation were in force. Historian James Oakes, for instance, finds that “Black soldiers in exempted areas became especially aggressive liberators of their fellow slaves.” Marching into loyal border states where wartime emancipation acts did not reach, regiments of colored troops sometimes conscripted enslaved people off plantations and refused slave-owners’ demands for the return of their “property,” claiming that the people they protected were “prisoners of war.” Such acts aided the ad hoc evolution of wartime emancipation and illustrated the gap between federal policy and its official spatial regime of

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③² As Chandra Manning explains, emancipation in border states and along the Mississippi River often entailed a complicated process of movement in an ever-shifting landscape. Some refugees from slavery made their way to Cairo, Illinois, but finding it a cramped and disease-ridden place, opted to instead go to Columbus, Kentucky, where slavery was still legal. Still others, encamped in Cairo, found themselves caught in the emerging geographical vision of the federal government and its relocation schemes to establish farms on islands in the Mississippi River. For many refugees in the border states, this confusing geopolitical landscape meant finding freedom by moving farther south, and some were relocated as far south as Island Number Sixty, somewhere between Memphis and Helena, Arkansas. Manning, Troubled Refuge, pp. 129-31.
freedom and the on-the-ground reality of force of arms.\textsuperscript{33} Soldiering both introduced many freedpeople to freedom and shaped the geographical reach of freedom itself.

Soldiering also influenced freedpeople’s later migration decisions. Historians have noted important ways in which army service contributed to literacy and ideas of citizenship among former slaves.\textsuperscript{34} Many freedpeople also gained important geographical knowledge while serving, as their time with the army introduced them to new places and created the possibility of forging connections with new communities. Two ideas emerge most consistently: gaining first-hand knowledge of new places by marching through them and making connections with fellow soldiers that facilitated a postwar migration.

Robert Anderson certainly learned of new places through soldiering. Anderson, who was born enslaved in Kentucky, eventually became the largest black landowner in Nebraska. He joined the U.S. army late in the Civil War and subsequently served most of his three-year enlistment on the western frontier between 1865 and 1867. While with the army, Anderson marched “[f]rom Missouri to Kansas, from Kansas to Texas, from Texas back to Missouri...covering in all...a little over thirty-two hundred miles.”\textsuperscript{35} The army introduced Anderson to the possibilities of mobility, and his service as part of an army securing the West for American expansion convinced him that the frontier provided a promise of landownership and an opportunity to make a place for himself. After mustering out, he worked odd jobs as a laborer but “was not satisfied,” and he struck out for the prairie of Nebraska in about 1884. “The idea of owning my own land and being independent,” recalled Anderson, “had been given me while I was still in the army, and I had never been able to

\textsuperscript{34} See, for instance, Hahn, \textit{A Nation Under Our Feet}, pp. 90-111.
get rid of that idea. It is to that determination, formed when a soldier, that I owe my independence today.” For Anderson, army service provided lessons in independence and geography, and he combined this new knowledge in his decision to migrate to Nebraska in the 1880s.

Many formerly enslaved black troops, especially those whose service allowed them to experience and imagine a life in new places, similarly decided to relocate after mustering out of the army. This was perhaps most common for soldiers like Anderson, who enlisted late in the Civil War and subsequently found themselves serving the remainder of their enlistment on the western frontier. James Martin, for instance, joined the army in 1864 or 1865, and as the fighting ended near his home state of Virginia, Martin was sent to Texas with the Ninth U.S. Cavalry. Martin soon found himself a Buffalo Soldier, manning forts in west Texas until he mustered out in 1872. The experience taught Martin that he enjoyed a mobile life. He decided to remain in Texas, working first on railroads and then as a cowboy before settling down at San Antonio. “I’d travel ’round again” if I could, Martin told an interviewer in the 1930s. “I don’t believe any man can be educated who ain’t traveled some.”

Mazique Sanco, who had been enslaved in South Carolina, echoed Martin’s feelings about the importance of experiencing a wider world. Sanco recalled he “was always an adventurer, wanting to see and learn things.” He never had a chance to enlist during the Civil War, and though he had reunited with his mother and found employment at the close of the war,

36 Leonard, From Slavery to Affluence, p. 51.
37 George P. Rawick, ed., The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport, Conn., 1972), Vol. 5, pt. 3, p. 64. (This collection hereafter cited as TAS.) Martin recalled that he joined the “Confed’rate Army,” but since he was then sent to Texas with the Ninth U.S. Cavalry (the famous buffalo soldier unit), it seems unlikely he was actually in the CSA army (see also Kevin Levin’s body of work for general lack of evidence of black soldiers serving in the CSA’s military). The Ninth Cavalry, however, was not mustered in until 1866, so the timing of Martin’s enlistment is unclear. Martin correctly recalled the names of the unit’s commanders, and his mustering out in 1872 suggests an enlistment in 1867, since the troops served five-year enlistments. Martin said he came to Texas under Captain Francis Dodge, who had been a lieutenant with the Second U.S. Colored Cavalry in Virginia and was transferred to the Ninth Cavalry after the war.
he “wasn’t learning enough” by remaining in his native neighborhood. So he joined the army, which took him from South Carolina to Missouri and Texas. He served five years stationed at Fort Concho on the Texas frontier, and when he mustered out of the army, he drifted first to Mexico, then to El Paso before finding steady employment in San Angelo. For Sanco and Martin, the army seems to have provided lessons in geography and mobility every bit as important as those in civic duty and literacy it has been noted for. For both Sanco and Martin, army service brought them to new places that became the sites of their postemancipation lives.

Other formerly enslaved people hinted at similar connections between the mobility of soldiering and postwar migrations. Ann Mitchell, for instance, who was born after the Civil War, remembered only a few things about her father: he joined the “Yankees” during the war, and he moved his family to Arkansas after emancipation. While Mitchell's interview left much unsaid about her father, one can imagine that he, too, drew on his time as a soldier in deciding what migration and freedom would mean for his family. Thomas Cole did draw a direct connection between his military service and his decision to relocate from Tennessee to Texas. Cole ran away from his owner in 1861 and joined the army. He manned artillery at the Battle of Chickamauga

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38 TAS Vol. 5, pt. 4, pp. 1-2. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers’ Project Ex-Slave Narratives have become central to the study of slavery and emancipation. That so many informants choose to talk about their mobility after emancipation is important and suggests the ways that migration was deeply formative to postemancipation identity and memory. Moreover, the oft-heard critique that the WPA interviews present too benign a view of slavery because the people interviewed in the 1930s were children in the antebellum period, holds less water for the WPA’s usefulness for studying postemancipation life; most informants were adolescents or adults when they migrated, and their experience of migration was often a central component of their narrative, suggesting the importance of migration to their identities and life histories. For recent works that have relied on the WPA narratives, see Edward E. Baptist, “‘Stol’ and Fetched Here’: Enslaved Migration, Ex-Slave Narratives, and Vernacular History,” in New Studies in the History of American Slavery ed. by Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp (Athens and London, 2007); Anthony E. Kaye, Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South (Chapel Hill, 2009); Gregory D. Smithers, Slave Breeding: Sex, Violence, and Memory in African American History (Gainesville, Fla., 2012); Heather Andrea Williams, Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery (Chapel Hill, 2012).

and then guarded a supply depot at Chattanooga. After mustering out, Cole got a job laying railroad track in Tennessee, but perceived that “Things [were] ’gin to git bad for me in Chattanooga as de white man finds out I run off from the South and jined de North.” Cole realized he was being squeezed out of employment in Tennessee because people knew he had served in the Union army, so he resolved to go where his past was unknown. He moved up north, but failed to find work there, so he bought a team and a wagon and moved his family to Texas. For Cole, army service restricted his geographical possibilities. “I couldn’t go South, for dey calls me a traitor and sho’ kill me iffen dey knows I fit for de North.” Because of his army service, emancipation for Cole meant finding a place where he could build a new life among strangers.40

Whether based on necessity or desire, army service provided a foundation on which to build communities in new places after emancipation. Consider, for example, William Branch and William Watkins, who had both been enslaved in Virginia. Though they came from adjoining counties in Virginia, they do not seem to have known each other prior to enlisting. Their shared service became the basis for a postemancipation kinship network in Texas, however, as through marriage and household patterns, they reconstituted a portion of their Virginia neighborhood in San Antonio. Like Sanco and Martin, Branch and Watkins decided to stay in Texas after mustering out, but they also represent an iteration of the second way soldiering shaped postwar migration: enlistment forged new personal connections that shaped decisions about place and migration. Both men enlisted sometime in 1870; Watkins enlisted in Ohio, and Branch in Baltimore. Their service overlapped in Texas, though Watkins was discharged before Branch

40 William Ball “Soldier” Williams III had a similar experience. He joined the army in Kentucky and served in the eastern theater, eventually mustering out at Jacksonville, Florida. He wanted to return to his family in Kentucky, but “They didn’t want to hire Negro soldiers.” Necessity forced his subsequent migration, but it also led him to a place where he felt he belonged: “I traveled about hunting a good place and got to Osceola, Arkansas. I been here in Forrest City twenty [odd] years. The best people in the world live in Arkansas.” TAS Vol. 11, pt 7, p. 192.
served the full term of his enlistment.\textsuperscript{41} Despite different trajectories within the army, they got to know each other while serving, and both decided to remain in San Antonio, where, according to census records, their fortunes merged into a single household. By 1920 Watkins appears to have married Branch’s stepdaughter, Corrine, and within ten years William Branch and his wife Julia headed a household with two grandchildren who bore the last name Watkins. William Watkins, though not listed in the 1930 census, may have also lived in that household—a WPA interviewer noted that he lived with Branch sometime in the late 1930s.\textsuperscript{42} Watkins must have died a few years after the interview; he does not appear in the 1940 census. By then, Branch lived in a household headed by his granddaughter Lorine Watkins (who was William Watkins’s daughter), and he died in February the following year.\textsuperscript{43} Having cut themselves off from kinship networks in Virginia, Watkins and Branch based their decisions to relocate on connections forged through military service, and they each became the basis of the other’s new kinship networks.

Samuel Hall, who published his recollections of slavery in 1918, also directly linked his soldiering experience to his migration. Rather than base his decisions regarding migration on having surveyed places while a soldier, however, Hall relocated after mustering out because of personal connections he made while enlisted. Hall was enslaved in Tennessee when war broke out, but he escaped to Union territory and joined the army. Though his narrative had little to say about his time as a soldier, Hall clearly decided while enlisted to move his family from the South after he mustered out. Orville Elder, a white editor who co-authored Hall’s narrative, stated that

\textsuperscript{41} The 1880 Federal Census lists William Branch as still enlisted with his location as “in camp near gov’t depot,” San Antonio, Co. I, 25\textsuperscript{th} Infantry, soldier.
\textsuperscript{42} TAS Vol. 5, pt., 4, p. 113.
\textsuperscript{43} Lorine was the daughter of William Watkins and Corrine Watkins (Corrine was William Branch’s daughter). See 1880, 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 Federal Census, Texas, Bexar County, San Antonio; William Branch, February 27, 1941, Texas Department of State Health Services; Austin Texas, USA; Texas Death Certificates, 1903–1982.
Immediately after the close of the civil war Samuel Hall, his wife and his five children came to Washington, Iowa. Mr. Hall had planned to go to Wisconsin, but while in Memphis serving out the time of his enlistment with the union army he fell in with Major James Hope and Captain Allen and he liked them and concluded to go where they went. They came back to Washington and here Mr. Hall came.⁴⁴

At first Hall considered moving to Wisconsin. Perhaps he had heard about it from another soldier or even while enslaved and thought it offered appealing opportunities. But having made the acquaintance of two white army officers, Hall eventually decided to follow them back to their homes in Iowa. Like many other soldiers, Hall forged new personal connections while in the army, and those connections made visible a new place, with a new set of opportunities and possibilities, in Hall’s mental map.⁴⁵

None of the formerly enslaved soldiers discussed above mentioned whether they remained in touch with kith and kin back at their old homes. And indeed, some who decided to relocate after mustering out made it clear they did not stay in communication with their native communities. Many freedpeople who enlisted, however, did write back to family members, and others, like Ann Mitchell’s father, returned home, gathered their families, and migrated after mustering out. Likewise, William Yeates, an enslaved man who had enlisted with the Union army, mustered out in DeValls Bluff, Arkansas, from where he sent back for his wife in North Carolina.⁴⁶ For soldiers like Yeates, time in the army had an immediate impact on their own family’s geographical knowledge, and such knowledge likely trickled out into their wider communities. As soldiers

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⁴⁴ Samuel Hall and Orville Elder, *Samuel Hall, 47 Years a Slave: A Brief Story of His Life Before and After Freedom Came to Him* (Washington, Iowa, 1912), p. 41.
⁴⁵ Some freedpeople likewise found the that the army opened new geographical possibilities to them, despite not themselves being soldiers. One such “Contraband,” whose name is lost to the historical record but whose story was published by the Stillwater (Minnesota) Daily Gazette in 1886, fell in with Sherman’s troops in Georgia, and followed the Union army through Georgia, North Carolina, Washington, D.C., and eventually to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he remained. He never enlisted as a soldier, though he did provide labor at Union army camps. He did not return to the South after arriving in Minnesota.
⁴⁶ TAS Vol. 11, pt. 7, p. 252.
returned home, they told people about the places they had seen and learned about. Powell Clayton, a Union officer who later became governor of Arkansas during Reconstruction, described army service as a mechanism for postwar migration to his state. Remarkering on the number of “newcomers” to the state in 1868, Clayton observed that they “had been impressed during their period of service with the genial climate and great natural resources of Arkansas and…when mustered out of service had consequently adopted that State as their home.”

Soldiers noticed and discussed the countryside they observed while serving. Elijah Marrs, for instance, found himself comparing the home he left behind to the landscapes he passed through with the army. While riding through Tennessee in an open railcar, Marrs “gazed upon the hills and dales, the fields and forests” and “could not keep from thinking of the beautiful part of the State in which I was reared, its green fields and pastures.” Later, when stationed near the Mississippi River, he again found himself thinking comparatively about the attractiveness of various locations. When ordered to leave the post along the river, he “rejoiced at the change,” because he had found the river to be an “unhealthy locality.” Spending time in the Mississippi bottoms convinced Marrs that he preferred the Kentucky upcountry. After mustering out, Marrs decided to return to his former home and stayed in the area during Reconstruction, but like many formerly enslaved soldiers, he had found in his army experience an important geography lesson, and one he may well have shared with his home community after the war.

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47 Clayton, July 2, 1868 speech at Little Rock, quoted in “Rush, Anderson Louis,” unpublished encyclopedic article, Tom W. Dillard Black Arkansiana Materials, Series VI, Box 1, Folder 3, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library.
48 Adam Wesley Dean notes that observations of the southern countryside, for instance, helped northern soldiers develop antislavery positions during the Civil War. See Dean, An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill, 2015), pp. 101-07.
49 Elijah Marrs, Life and History of the Rev. Elijah P. Marrs, First Pastor of Beargrass Baptist Church, and Author (Louisville, Ky., 1885), pp. 31, 71.
Between soldiering and navigating the fraught geopolitics of wartime refugeeism, emancipation, for many freedpeople, was a process of moving about, making new connections, and charting new territory. It must be noted, however, that the mobility associated with emancipation often entailed emotional and physical suffering. For many people, the process of making it to contraband camps was a dangerous undertaking. Slaveowners and home guard units pursued runaways from plantations—in many places the breakdown of slavery was accompanied by a hardening of the institution’s spatial regime. Other people who made it to contraband camps did so because they had been driven from their homes by angry and vengeful owners, as was the case for many of the bondswomen in Kentucky whose husbands had enlisted in the army. Similarly, men who wanted to enlist had to be cautious as they made their way to Union lines, for not only were they runaway slaves, but they also sought to become enemy combatants. Louis Hughes, for instance, recalled that “Two slaves belonging to one Wallace, one of our nearest neighbors, had tried to escape to the Union soldiers, but were caught, brought back and hung.”

For those who successfully made it to federal camps, the process of doing so could put their health and physical integrity at risk. Others knowingly sacrificed kinship for freedom. Achieving mobility during wartime was a struggle, and for many freedpeople, the connections forged and geopolitical lessons learned during the war were often less about a positive embrace of mobility and more about the necessity of movement to the act of becoming free. Wartime mobility was thus, in many ways, a collective political struggle waged across space and through innumerable individual acts.

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50 Hughes, Thirty Years a Slave, p. 154.
51 A detailed discussion of the hardships entailed by wartime mobility is found in Jim Downs, Sick From Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction (Oxford, Eng., 2012); see also Manning, Troubled Refuge.
Mobile Occupations and the Spread of Geopolitical Information

While experiences in contraband camps and through the army were major avenues for formerly enslaved people to gain knowledge of the wider world during the Civil War, emancipation greatly enhanced and expanded freedpeople’s access to information and mobility. Mobile occupations, such as working on railroads or steamboats, provided freedpeople opportunities to experience new places and establish new connections. Some occupations prior to emancipation had entailed a measure of mobility and had been an important link between plantation-bound enslaved people and the wider world. Certainly many enslaved people had enough mobility to occasionally leave the confines of their plantations or immediate neighborhoods, and many thousands of others were forcibly migrated throughout the South—enslavement rarely mean immobility. Teamsters hauled goods between plantations and towns, enslaved midwives moved about to assist in childbirth, and religious service regularly brought bondspeople from different plantations together, albeit often under supervision of their owners.52

Fewer enslaved people enjoyed opportunities for long distance mobility, though that happened often enough to provide at least some linkage for most enslaved communities to distant people, places, and ideas.53 Enslaved body servants, for instance, accompanied their owners to different states, even sometimes to free states. In places they returned to repeatedly, they sometimes established meaningful local connections. The knowledge of distant places and

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53 O’Donovan, “Writing Slavery into Freedom’s Stories,” pp. 30-2 challenges Walter Johnson’s idea of a carceral landscape, suggesting that mobility and travel were central to the lived experience of enslavement, lending many enslaved people cosmopolitan outlooks and wide social networks. Indeed, as O’Donovan writes, “A mobile workforce generated profit” and was at the heart of slavery.
connections forged while visiting those places shaped the geography of escape attempts and provided a conduit between less mobile enslaved people and the larger geopolitical landscape. Most importantly, perhaps, enslaved people with riverine or maritime occupations had both a high degree of mobility and the ability to act as information carriers between distant communities. Indeed, such waterborne bondspeople served as the long-distance tendrils of the enslaved grapevine. Historian Thomas Buchanan, whose work explores the lives of enslaved people on the Mississippi River, argues that black riverboat workers possessed important “geographic knowledge” and comprised the “underground mail service of the enslaved economy.”

With emancipation, and with the postwar economic reconstruction of the South, mobile occupations factored more heavily into the migratory and information networks of freedpeople. Similarly to soldiering, mobile occupations gave some freedpeople a chance to visit new places, where they either decided to remain or from which they returned to former homes with new geographical knowledge to share with community members. In addition to shaping migration decisions, mobile occupations also continued to function as information conduits: mobile freedpeople carried news between far-flung family members, friends, and acquaintances old and new. For many people then, mobile occupations structured both migration decisions and information networks, and like wartime refugeeism or soldiering, these occupations contributed to the experience of emancipation as a process based on space and movement.

With the expansion of southern transportation infrastructure after the Civil War, many freedpeople found employment building railroads and canals or as members of a train or boat

54 Buchanan, Black Life on the Mississippi, p. 97. For similar situations of maritime mobility, see Calvin Schermerhorn, Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South (Baltimore, 2011), chap. 2.
crew. Arch Wesley Nelson, for instance, “followed railroading” in the early 1870s. He worked on a railroad in Alabama and then on a canal on the Tennessee River before deciding in 1877 to migrate to Arkansas.\textsuperscript{55} Ann Mitchell, whose father was mentioned above as an example of the connection between soldiering and migrating, also provided evidence that working for a railroad may have played a role in her father’s decision to move his family to Arkansas. Mitchell reported that her father “was a brakeman on a train when I was fifteen years old, and we come to Arkansas.”\textsuperscript{56} Oscar Triplett similarly transformed a job as a brakeman into a post-emancipation migratory experience. Triplett “heard the call of the west and landed at Dodge City, Kansas. There he hired to the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad as a brakeman.” He eventually won a promotion “to the important run from La Junta, Colorado to Denver.” Triplett made “wise property investments” in Denver and became a wealthy resident of that city, an extremely unlikely event had he not found employment on a railroad.\textsuperscript{57}

Riverboats offered the same sort of mobility as railroads could and played a similar role in introducing former slaves to new lands and new communities. Peter Brown, born enslaved in Mississippi, later “worked on steamboats on the Mississippi River.” On one river trip, he “stopped off...at Helena for Christmas,” where, when he was thirty years old, he eventually returned and settled.\textsuperscript{58} Perhaps the Christmas he spent in Helena left such an impression on him that he resolved to move there when he could—a decision made possible by the mobility he experienced while working on steamboats on the Mississippi River. George Conway also turned his occupation on a steamboat into an act of migration. Conway was born in Missouri, and he

\textsuperscript{55} TAS Supplement 2, Vol. 1, p. 110.  
\textsuperscript{56} TAS Supplement 2, Vol. 1, p. 102.  
\textsuperscript{57} TAS Supplement 1, Vol. 2, pp. 94-5.  
\textsuperscript{58} TAS Vol. I, pt. 1, p. 314.
found a job as a cook on the steamer *Gold Dust* out of St. Louis. He disembarked at Omaha, Nebraska, in 1867, successfully exchanging his mobility as a riverboat crewman into a new life on the Nebraska frontier.\(^{59}\)

For some freedpeople, work on riverboats or railroads was temporary employment, and they returned to their former homes after a period of mobility. These people represent one pathway through which firsthand knowledge of distant places entered freedpeople’s local information networks.\(^{60}\) Wash Anderson, for instance, found that postwar employment took him throughout the states of the old Southwest. In 1855, Anderson had been brought from South Carolina to Orange County, Texas, near the Sabine River, and was still there when emancipation came. While enslaved, Anderson very likely served as a connection between his plantation community and the outside world—he was tasked with looking after the horses and driving his owner’s family around in a carriage. After emancipation, Anderson’s world expanded further. He worked on steamboats, railroads, and in sawmills, and his work took him to Louisiana, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. He eventually returned to Beaumont, not far from where he had lived while enslaved. There he married and joined the Baptist church.\(^{61}\) As he had during his enslavement, Anderson likely continued to serve as a repository of geographical knowledge for his local community in Beaumont.

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\(^{59}\) *TAS* Supplement 2, Vol. 1, p. 309.

\(^{60}\) Leon F. Litwack suggests that freedpeople’s movements during and after emancipation were instances of trading former homes for “unknown alternatives.” As this chapter shows, mobility and kinship networks carried information that challenges Litwack’s vision of postwar migration. Freedpeople possessed at times quite detailed knowledge of the places they chose to go, and their decisions were shaped by information about the destination rather than solely by negative conditions at their points of departure. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), p. 304. Litwack’s interpretation falls into what Susan O’Donovan describes as scholars’ inability “to accept the recently freed as fully realized political people.” Enslaved people’s geopolitical literacy encompassed detailed conceptual maps of the world. Those maps shaped the routes of freedpeople’s migrations and the possibilities of freedom. O’Donovan, “Writing Slavery into Freedom’s Stories,” p. 27.

Mobile occupations also brought freedpeople into contact with new communities and allowed them to forge new relationships. Enslaved riverboat workers had previously forged similar connections, but the nature of enslavement meant that those connections were often tenuous and temporary. With emancipation, more black southerners gained access to the sorts of mobile occupations that could create new and lasting kinship networks. To invoke Troutman’s concept of geopolitical literacy, emancipation and its occupational possibilities allowed more people the ability to “write upon their landscapes.”⁶² Such was the case for the parents of Omelia Thomas. Her father, Frank Johnson, was born in Kentucky, and after the war, he got a job on a riverboat that traveled on the Mississippi River between New Orleans, Friar’s Point, Mississippi, and Helena, Arkansas, a route of about 400 miles. He occasionally made it as far inland as Marianna, Arkansas, a small town about twenty miles from Helena, where he noticed a young woman “struggling along….trying to make a quilt or something useful.” She was sewing with “ravelings,” scraps of thread salvaged from old textiles, and Johnson promised her, “next time I come I’ll bring you a spool of thread if you don’t mind.” As it turns out, she did not mind. He courted her, they married, and Johnson quit the mobile life of river work and moved to Arkansas where he set up as a farmer. Although for Johnson, a mobile occupation led to a change of place, he, like Anderson, likely became a source of knowledge for his local community; his travels had

⁶² Troutman, “Grapevine in the Slave Market,” p. 207. To be sure, many enslaved people worked on riverboats and wharves, or built railroads and roads through the South. Likewise many transported goods or delivered messages for their owners. As Susan O’Donovan has recently reminded historians, enslaved people were highly mobile—the profits of slavery, indeed, relied on that mobility. But slavery circumscribed the extent of those occupations and that mobility, and the reality of the slave market could intervene at any time to break up kinship and information networks. Emancipation thus expanded existing forms of geopolitical literacy, as freedpeople carried with them from slavery knowledge of distant places, connections with distant people, and political forms that emphasized the importance of place and space as well as information and kinship networks. Emancipation allowed more people to write upon the landscape, but the things they wrote were often colored by experiences, memories, and ideas formed during enslavement. O’Donovan, “Writing Slavery into Freedom’s Stories,” pp. 26-38, esp. pp. 29-32.
acquainted him with a large section of the Mississippi Delta. Thomas Buchanan estimates that “as many as 5,000 African Americans labored on Reconstruction era rivers,” primarily on the Mississippi and its tributaries. Along with railroad workers, they composed the backbone of long-distance information networks among freedpeople.

Freedpeople without mobile occupations found it useful, when considering migration, to have connections to friends or family whose jobs lent them a measure of mobility. Sallie Newsom was able relocate because of her cousin’s mobility. Sallie had been enslaved near Thomasville, Georgia. Immediately after emancipation, her father wanted the family to move to Mississippi, where he may have had a second wife. But Sallie’s mother refused, and she and Sallie remained with their former owner in Georgia. A few years later, however, the two migrated to Holly Springs, Mississippi, where Sallie could occasionally make the nine-mile trip to see her father in Waterford, Mississippi, a small town to the south of Holly Springs. Despite living near both of her parents, Sallie wanted to get out of Mississippi. So she turned to her wider kinship network, which included a cousin who was “a railroad man.” Sallie’s cousin “helped [her] run away” to Clarendon, Arkansas, about a hundred miles west of Holly Springs; he paid for her ticket, and his knowledge of the region may have helped shape her decision to go to Clarendon rather than elsewhere. After a few years as a domestic worker in Clarendon, Sallie went to visit her mother in Holly Springs. Sallie’s mobile cousin facilitated her postwar migration and likely also provided an important link between Sallie’s life in Arkansas and her kinfolk in Mississippi.

63 TAS Vol. 10, pt. 6, pp. 300-01.
64 Buchanan, Black Life on the Mississippi, p. 154.
65 TAS Vol. 10, pt. 5, pp. 213-14. Henry Waldon used a similar connection in the course of his postwar movements. After emancipation his mother married a man “who used to be old Holbert’s nigger driver.” Waldon stayed with this man for two years, but then he decided to “run away from him in ’86.” Waldon went to a man “who used to belong
Kinship Networks, Go-Betweens, and Chain Migrations

The information collected and transmitted by freedpeople engaged in mobile occupations considerably enlarged the store of knowledge of the wider world available to formerly enslaved communities throughout the South. That mobility turned some freedpeople into go-betweens for their kinship networks and more far-flung communities. Having migrated and settled into a new place, many freedpeople used correspondence and short-term visiting to encourage others to migrate, too. Sometimes the encouragement was inadvertent: when people returned to their old homes having obviously done well in new places, their appearance alone could induce others to follow their example. The same was true of letter writing. In the course of keeping in touch and explaining their new surroundings, some freedpeople piqued the interests of those who had remained behind. At other times, however, letter writing and visiting were pointed mechanisms to induce friends and family to move. Having experienced a new place and concluding things were better there, freedpeople circulated this new geographical knowledge through their kinship networks in the hopes of improving the lives of their loved ones. Whether purposefully or not, freedpeople who migrated and then shared the knowledge of a distant place with their kinship networks acted as go-betweens: they made unknown places legible to other people and helped them imagine a future there.

John Payne, who moved from Franklin County, Georgia, to Brinkley, Arkansas, provided such a link for his family. Payne went to Brinkley alone, paying his way and riding the train. Then he wrote back home and told his family to join him.66 In the decades following emancipation, many freedpeople left Georgia for Arkansas, and it is possible that Payne’s

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decision was based on knowledge of those who went before him, or that the information in his letter back to family trickled out into the wider community, encouraging others to migrate. Certainly, correspondence networks played a large role in shaping postemancipation migration. Ellen Fitzgerald, for instance, relied on information from friends to plan her migration from Mississippi to Arkansas. “I was writing to friends,” she told a WPA interviewer. “They had immigrated, so we immigrated and been here ever since.” Unfortunately the contents of that correspondence are lost, but it must have included enough detail about Arkansas to make it seem safe, relatable, and worth a try. Sarah Wells decided to relocate based on a similar experience. Her son set out for Little Rock, Arkansas, after the war, but she stayed put. He “kept after [her] to come here and [she] come”; go-betweens’ persistence in telling their kinfolk about the world often had the desired result. For Fitzgerald and others, correspondence helped overcome anxiety about the strangeness and unfamiliarity of distant places.

Sometimes simply knowing someone who had made a successful migration proved enough to overcome the uncertainty inherent in relocation. Emmet Bael, for instance, moved from Bolivar, Tennessee, to Biscoe, Arkansas, because his “Mama come here in 1880,” and he “followed her in 1881.” It is unclear whether they had been in touch after she got to Arkansas, but at the very least it is easy to surmise Bael had received no negative news of his mother’s new location. Clay Reaves also used his kinship network to help decide whether to migrate. His

67 TAS Vol. 8, pt. 2, p. 304. Nettie Van Buren’s parents made a similar decision. They relocated in Arkansas “because my mother had a brother down here and she heard it was such fine farming land.” TAS Vol. 11, pt. 7, p. 5. Sarah Wells’s decision-making process relied on a similar network. “My son was living in Little Rock and he kept after me to come here and I come.” TAS Vol. 11, pt. 7, p. 92.
68 TAS Vol. 11, pt. 7, p. 92.
69 TAS Vol. 8, pt. 1, p. 127. Sarah Pittman also based her migration to Arkansas on kinship: “We come to Arkansas because we had kinfolk down here. Just picked up and come.” So did Jeff Metcalf. He “got busted farmin’” in Mississippi, and so he moved to Arkansas, where he “knowed a heap o’ people said they was doing so well.” TAS Vol. 10, pt. 5, p. 353; see also TAS Vol. 10, pt. 5, p. 72.
sister and brother-in-law had moved to Arkansas, and Reaves “heard a lot of talk” about it. He decided to visit them and liked it so much he stayed three months, then he returned home, gathered his mother and their belongings, and moved to Arkansas in 1887.\textsuperscript{70} Having kinfolk who had already migrated opened new geographical possibilities for Reaves and his mother. Moreover, unlike many freedpeople’s kinship-based migrations in the postwar era, the Reaves’ migration was not aimed at reuniting a family separated by slavery or the war. Instead, it was a case of drawing on family connections to map previously unknown spaces of possibility and belonging.\textsuperscript{71}

Reaves made his decision to migrate after visiting kinfolk who had already relocated, but more often, it was return visits from migrants that induced others to set out for new places.\textsuperscript{72} Visiting forged two-way communication networks between mobile freedpeople and their former homes, and it created a postwar South in motion. Lawrence Hampton routinely engaged in visiting, serving as a bridge connecting his new home in Arkansas with his birth community in South Carolina. Hampton had moved to Forrest City, Arkansas, after hearing about it being “\textit{sic} fine farming land,” and once he got set up there, he “made money.” But he missed his native community and traveled back to South Carolina when he could: “I been back a number of

\textsuperscript{70} TAS Vol. 10, pt. 6, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{71} The connections between migrants and their original homes were sometimes more ephemeral, but they may still have played a role in shaping local knowledge of distant places. Cato Carter, for instance, left his mother in Alabama and moved to Texas in the late 1880s or early 1890s. He did make one visit back to his old home, around the time of the first world war, to visit his mother, but otherwise, he kept in touch by sending her “things I thought she’d want.” It is unclear whether these “things” included messages or were simply items that he could afford based on his employment in Texas. Either way, for forty-four years, Carter kept open a link between his native kinship community in Alabama and his post-migration life in Texas. TAS Vol. 4, pt. 1, p. 211. During the Great Migration of the twentieth century, it was common for those who had found good jobs in the urban North to send money back to their families in the South; such remittances were likely common during the earlier period of intra-South migration.\textsuperscript{72} Litwack, \textit{Been in the Storm So Long}, p. 326. Litwack mentions visiting in relation to ties between slaveowners and freedpeople, noting that these visits were “perhaps to let their former master and mistress know how they were faring in freedom or to see old friends who had remained after emancipation.” Keeping up ties with former owners may have been the point of some visits, but those ties were also the bonds that kept plantation-based grape-vine networks operable.
times visiting.” Even then, though, Arkansas called him, and he found he “couldn’t go back to
stay.”\textsuperscript{73} For Hampton, visiting was a function of balancing two poles of freedom: landownership
in Arkansas, and kinship and community in South Carolina. For people in his wider communities
in both poles, however, Hampton’s visits likely provided a geopolitical information conduit. And
in this, he was not unique, for postwar black migration was often a two-way movement.

Pierce Harper created a similar connection between Texas and South Carolina. After
emancipation he attended school and struggled along with short-term employment in farming
before finding a job in the turpentine industry near Columbia, South Carolina. Once there, he
married, but must have felt restless. In 1877 he moved to Texas where he found that Galveston
“was a little pen then, a little mess,” and Houston “wasn’t nothing but a mudhole.” So he became
somewhat itinerant, left Texas, and “messed ’round in South Carolina again a while and then
come back to Galveston.” But he still could not stay put. When the Spanish-American war
began, he headed to his sister’s place in Washington, D.C., to enlist in the army and wound up as
a teamster hauling goods between Pennsylvania, Virginia, and South Carolina. After the war,
Harper returned to Texas. Between his east coast kinship communities in Washington and South
Carolina and his adopted home in Texas, Harper’s travels spanned about 2,500 miles.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{73} TAS Vol. 9, pt. 3, p. 139. For some freedpeople, visiting and correspondence created information networks that
spanned large areas. Jake Walker, for instance, lived in Clarendon, Arkansas, but kinship networks kept him
informed of events in Louisiana and other parts of Arkansas. His daughter, who lived in Hot Springs, Arkansas, kept
up correspondence with him and visited on occasion. He also had a sister in Shreveport who “keep up with us all.”
He visited his sister sometimes, and even occasionally found work in Louisiana, but his rheumatism, he said, made
Arkansas a more comfortable place to live. TAS Vol. 11, pt. 7, p. 41. People who had been moved away from kith
and kin while enslaved sometimes formed similar networks through postwar visiting. James Gill’s owner had taken
Gill and other enslaved people from Alabama to Arkansas sometime in the 1850s, though he left some of his
bondspeople behind at the old plantation in Alabama. After the war, Gill recalled, “Some of de older peoples, dey
went back to Alabama time or two.” They did not go to stay but to visit with folk who had remained there. TAS Vol.
9, pt. 3, pp. 22-25.

\textsuperscript{74} TAS Vol. 4, pt. 2, p. 113. Sometimes such visits did not achieve their stated aim, though they still acted as
mechanisms to transmit geographical information. Sarah Fitzpatrick, for instance, recalled that she and her husband
separated because they “jes’ couldn’t make it so he left home.” He went from Alabama to Louisiana, and must have
found conditions there worthwhile. He returned to Alabama and tried to persuade Sarah to return to Louisiana with
White observers in regions with high amounts of out-migration worried about the impact of visiting in encouraging more emigration. The Richmond *Whig*, in 1870, raised the alarm that migration to the Gulf States was depleting Virginia of its black labor force and that short-term visits were increasing the problem:

The Christmas holidays brought many of them back on visits to their families, and all such will probably prove efficient emigration missionaries. Returning with their holiday outfits and supplies of money and full of the novelties of Southern plantation life, they will probably greatly increase the already existing inclination among the colored people of the State to remove southward. If only ten thousand went from among us last year, we may count upon double the number the present year.75

Such visits, as *Whig’s* editor rightly perceived, were key to freedpeople’s information networks.

The links between individual return migrations and large-scale movements suggest the impact of visiting on routes of migration. Consider the stream of migration from South Carolina to Arkansas in the 1880s. In about 1870, Warren McKinney and his mother left Edgefield County, South Carolina, with “a white man or two, but colored leaders mostly” who got a group of freedpeople together to walk to the West. They wound up in Carlisle, Arkansas, and found it easy living. But “[t]he old Master in South Carolina persuaded his mother to come back. They all went back four or five years.” While there, in 1876, McKinney married a woman named Amanda on the adjoining farm, and sometime around then, his mother died. After his mother’s death, McKinney and Amanda decided to return to Arkansas, sometime between 1881 and 1893.76 He

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75 Richmond *Whig*, Jan. 7, 1870, p. 1. The editor of the Nashville *Union and American* similarly noted that many freedmen who had left Tennessee for plantation work in Mississippi and Arkansas had families in Tennessee that they regularly returned to. The article did not indicate how this factored into encouraging emigration from Tennessee, but it, too, noted the pervasiveness of return migrations within the South. *Nashville Union and American*, Oct. 22, 1872, p. 2.

76 McKinney’s interview did not indicate when exactly he returned to Arkansas, hence the date range, but his migration history can be partially reconstructed through census records. He appears in the 1900 Federal Census in Hazen, Arkansas, with a twenty-year-old daughter born in South Carolina (1880) and a seven-year-old son born in
must have felt, based on his first move, that Arkansas offered possibilities South Carolina could not. In Arkansas, McKinney owned a farm of 300 acres and then one of 80 acres, and he “liked it fine.” His involvement with a larger emigration movement made possible his later family-based migration.

Louise Pettis’s family had a similar route of return migration. They left Barnwell County, South Carolina (adjacent to Edgefield County) for Arkansas, persuaded to migrate because of racial violence in South Carolina and by information obtained through a labor recruiter. After getting to Arkansas, however, her father “grieved for South Carolina, so he went back and took us but ma wanted to come back [to Arkansas]. We stayed there a year or two. We made a crop.” But then, like McKinney and his wife, they returned to Arkansas. “We all come back,” Pettis recalled. “There was more room out here and so many of us.” Pettis and McKinney, in their WPA interviews, discussed only their own families’ moves between South Carolina and Arkansas, but, suggestively, in about the same year McKinney returned to Arkansas after his mother’s death, a few thousand freedpeople left Edgefield County for Arkansas, spurred to move by racial violence. To escape the situation in Edgefield County, they could have gone to many different places. That they chose Arkansas may have been influenced by the return migrations of people like Pettis and McKinney, who carried knowledge of conditions in Arkansas back to their native communities in South Carolina.

Arkansas (1893). Based on the wording in his interview, it seems likely he returned to Arkansas in late 1880 or early 1881.

As Pettis’s migration to Arkansas suggests, postwar labor recruitment often operated at least in part through freedpeople’s kinship and community networks. And because labor recruitment networks relied on freedpeople to act as intermediaries, the lines separating white planters’ efforts to recruit labor from the information that circulated through black kinship networks could at times become murky. Chain migrations among kinfolk, moreover, often involved both individual migrations and ones undertaken in relation to labor recruitment. In this way, kinship migration patterns and organized labor recruitment efforts fed into and shaped each other. Henry Kirk Miller’s parents, for instance, migrated to Arkansas before him. He remained behind in Georgia and got married in 1872, and then in 1873 he followed his parents: “A man from Arkansas came there, getting up a colony of colored [people] to go to Arkansas to farm….Me and my wife joined up to go.” Miller’s migration was thus about fulfilling two important aspects of freedom: establishing and maintaining family connections, and finding gainful employment. And he achieved both. Miller became a successful caterer in Little Rock, established a multi-generation household, and kept his parents’ memory close with “life-sized bust portraits of his mother and father” that hung in the parlor.\(^{80}\)

In such instances it is hard to tell whether freedpeople responded to the words of labor recruiters or to the appeals of friends and family. Anna King, for instance, lived in North Carolina after emancipation, but she married a preacher from Arkansas. “He always said he was going to bring [her] out to this country [Arkansas]. He was always tellin’ me ’bout Little Rock and Hot Springs.” He died before they could relocate there together, but King kept the idea of Arkansas alive in her geographical imagination, and “when they was emigratin’ folks here, I come.” The opportunity afforded her through organized labor recruitment offered King a way to

\(^{80}\) TAS Vol. 10, pt. 5, pp. 81-87.
fulfill the future she and her husband planned, and though she needed the planters’ networks to provide transportation, it was her kinship network that provided the information that made Arkansas legible and migration attractive to begin with.81

Labor recruitment agents also knew they could rely on freedpeople’s own networks to help achieve their aims of peopling plantations in the cotton states. “Doc” John Pope, who had been enslaved near De Soto, Mississippi, acted as a labor recruitment intermediary on at least one occasion. Immediately following emancipation, Pope made his way to Memphis and eventually attended Fisk University, where he studied medicine. In 1881 he went to Biscoe, Arkansas, where his uncle Isaac Pope was farming. And there he remained, except for when “W. T. Edmonds and P. H. Conn sent me back home to get more hands.” He pulled on his old community ties near De Soto and got fifty-two families to sign on to farm near Biscoe, Arkansas.82 Elvie Lomack found herself in Arkansas as the result of similar labor recruitment efforts. She and her parents were getting along in Tennessee after emancipation, farming for the woman who had owned her mother. One day, “a man [her] mother knowed” came to get families to move to Arkansas. He had been in Arkansas two years, and he “come back to Tennessee and, oh Lord, [he told them] you could do this and that, so we come here.” Lomack did not dwell on the mechanics of labor recruitment, but her testimony is clear evidence that planters in Arkansas used freedpeople’s networks to attract labor. Lomack’s parents decided to move to Arkansas because they knew the man who came to tell them about the opportunities there. He was a go-

81 TAS Vol. 9, pt. 4, pp. 205-06.
82 TAS Vol. 10, pt. 5, p. 360.
between who had gained geographical knowledge and brought it back to his former community, and he did so in the service of Arkansas planters.  

While white planters used freedpeople’s networks to attract labor to their plantations, freedpeople who acted as intermediaries did so because they saw the opportunities available through this arrangement as beneficial to their communities. George Wiggins and Isham Johnson, who had been enslaved in Virginia, worked on Edward Gay’s Louisiana plantation after emancipation. They went to visit their families in Virginia in 1870 and were told “if any of their friends would like to come out with them,” they could make at least twenty dollars a month. Wiggins and Johnson must have found the offer appealing. Wiggins wrote back, “There is a Great Menney people here working for 25 cts per day[,] those people cant live here.” Johnson, too, wrote back, noting that his own family was ready to contract for the Louisiana wages. As historian William Cohen concludes of such informal recruitment efforts, the conflation of black kinship networks and white labor recruitment “shows the potential for chain migration between Virginia, where jobs were scarce and wages low, and Louisiana, where pay was relatively high and workers scarce.”  

Many freedpeople who had migrated and found good employment returned home and induced others to migrate. Sometimes they did so solely in the interests of kinship and community; other times, they did so in the employ of planters. But working to recruit labor does

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83 This is not to deny the role of labor recruitment in shaping postwar black migration. Certainly, as William Cohen has shown, labor recruiters did much to direct the movement of freedpeople. But the networks of labor recruitment relied on black people’s own networks of information and movement, and the focus on labor recruitment has obscured the role of geopolitical literacy and information networks in freedpeople’s intra-South migrations. The overlap between white labor recruitment and black information networks, moreover, helps explain why it is often hard to tell in WPA interviews whether freedpeople heard about and decided to move to distant places because of recruiters’ tales of those places, or because of letter writing, return migration, and visiting among kith and kin. For more on labor recruitment, see Cohen, *At Freedom’s Edge*, chap. 5.

not negate the interests of kith and kin. Cohen questions whether freedpeople like Wiggins and Johnson should count as “labor recruiters.” That question, however, further confuses and obscures the conflation between labor recruitment and black geopolitical networks in the postwar period. Freedpeople used white labor needs just as planters used freedpeople’s kinship needs, and the two networks overlapped and supported each other. That overlap is important. It suggests that freedpeople could use migration to align their desire for employment with their commitment to building free institutions, and the not-uncommon practices of letter writing and return migration should caution us against giving labor recruitment undue weight in the shaping of freedpeople’s migratory routes.

Indeed, the WPA interviews reveal a widespread and amorphous geographical information network. Many interviewees recalled that they had simply “heard” about their migration destinations, and the vagueness of their recollections suggest the multiple conduits through which information spread: family members, formal institutions including newspapers and the church, colonization societies, and labor recruiters. Freedwoman Adelaide J. Vaughn’s mother moved their family from Alabama to Arkansas, for instance, “because she had heard so much talk about it.”85 Frances Smith similarly recalled that her parents moved to Arkansas because they “heard about [it] bein’ such a rich country,” and Maggie and Charlie Shaw said that “When [they] heard bout Arkansas being so rich and a new country, [they] wanted to come.”86 In the narratives formerly enslaved people shared with WPA interviewers, at least, it is difficult to separate the multiple information channels at work in postwar migration. Despite the evidence of letter writing, much of the information networks of postwar black migration remained reliant on

an oral culture, even if the information they carried originated in written documents. Historian Barbara J. Rozek’s work shows that Texas’s postwar immigration promoters strongly believed in the efficacy of the written word, focusing their efforts on published pamphlets to induce migration; the grapevine’s geopolitical communication networks, in contrast, demonstrate the continued power of word-of-mouth networks to shape freedpeople’s worldviews and actions and the ability of geopolitical information to move between oral and written channels.87

**Balancing the Local and the Distant**

Knowledge of distant places and the allure created by such knowledge could strain local relationships. Exploring migration patterns and associated decision making provides a way to explore how freedpeople balanced local commitments and knowledge of the wider world. Local networks and distant places sometimes came into conflict, and kinship networks could keep people tied to locations they may otherwise have left. Will Daily felt such a tension. Uncle Pete, an old plantation leader, told Daily that emancipation meant “You all is free people now, you can go when you please and come when you pleases and you can stay here or go some other place.” But that was not how postemancipation mobility played out for Daily. Though free of the imposition of his former owner, he was not free of local kinship ties, and the pull of distant places would have to wait: “I had to stay ’cause my mother stayed,” he said.88 Often, the tension between the local and the distant abated only when local ties were severed by death or conflict. Mollie Justice and her mother, for instance, moved to Arkansas from Tennessee after her father

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87 Barbara J. Rozek, *Come to Texas: Enticing Immigrants, 1865–1915* (College Station, Texas, 2003), p. 3. Together these overlapping networks suggest that the idea of somewhere else was constantly circulating through freedpeople’s conversations, debates, thoughts, political consciousnesses. The following chapter further explores the overlap between vernacular understandings and elite information networks in shaping freedpeople’s migrations.

died. The family had been sharecropping in Tennessee, but the two women did not remain there after losing the male head of household (in whose name their sharecropping contract was most likely made). The advantages of remaining in Tennessee no longer outweighed the difficulty of migration, and they set out for Arkansas, where Justice’s “two brothers had come a few years before hand.” Mollie and her mother had likely heard something of the good farming land available in Arkansas, and they may have felt a desire to join their kinfolk there while farming in Tennessee. 89

Indeed, freedpeople often set out on a migration only after the death of kinfolk or community members. Eli Coleman had married a woman in Kentucky after emancipation, and they lived together a few years.” But “one mornin’ Nora jus’ died, and there warn’t no chillen, so [Coleman] sets out for Texas.” He had heard about railroad work in the state, and after his wife’s death, nothing kept him tied to Kentucky. 90 Likewise, James Johnson moved from Mississippi to Texas because his “people died and [he] had to earn a living for [himself].” Johnson was the youngest of his siblings and had been educated after emancipation, but he could not find worthwhile employment in Mississippi after his parents died, so headed to Texas and pursued “any kind of labor work [he] could find.” 91 Many formerly enslaved people embarked on migrations following the death of their former owners, too. As had been the case during slavery, the death of an owner often meant financial insecurity for the plantation, and in the

89 TAS Supplement 1, Vol. 2, p. 11; Henry Doyl found himself in Arkansas under similar circumstances. He stated that “I come to Arkansas in 1887....My mother was dead. My stepfather had been out here” already. Lacking any more kinship ties to Tennessee and having one waiting for him in Arkansas, Doyl migrated. TAS Vol. 8, pt. 2, p. 207.
91 TAS Vol. 4, pt. 2, p. 217. Divorce could function similarly. James West initially remained with his former owner in Mississippi, but in 1874 he headed to Tennessee, where he married a woman and had a child. Five years later, however, she left him and took their son. After losing his family through divorce, West left Tennessee for Texas. TAS Vol. 5, pt. 4, p. 152.
postemancipation era such deaths threatened freedpeople’s wages. Thus for people who had
decided the safety of remaining with a former owner outweighed the uncertainty of migration, a
planter’s death provided the impetus to leave the old community. Such was the case for Penny
Thompson’s plantation community in Coosa County, Alabama. “After freedom,” Thompson
said, “mos’ of us stays with massa, ’cause we don’t know where to go and don’t want to go, but
’fore long massa dies and dat was mournin’ time. After de death, we all leaves.”

In these instances, death severed local ties, increased economic uncertainty, and made
migration more inviting. For other people, conflict within kinship networks provided the rationale
to trade local ties for distant places. Oscar James Rogers left North Carolina for Arkansas because
he was frustrated by his parents’ postemancipation employment choices. His parents took jobs in
the turpentine industry, but Rogers wanted them to find different work and perhaps had tried to
convince them to relocate with him. Turpentine work was notoriously exploitative, and Rogers
must have thought his family could do better elsewhere. Reflecting on his migration to Arkansas
years later, Rogers recalled, “I run off from my folks cause they kept staying there.” Dorsey
Nelson, who was born enslaved in Mississippi and eventually made his way to St. Paul,
Minnesota, also determined after emancipation that he could not reintegrate into his local
community because of conflict within his kinship network. Dorsey had enlisted in the Union army,
and his service had taken him far from home. As a solider, he traveled to Virginia, Alabama, and
Tennessee. But when he mustered out and returned home, his father and brothers defrauded him of

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92 TAS Vol. 5, pt. 4, p. 105. Ellen Betts had a similar experience. After emancipation her owner offered wages to
anyone who stayed on, and “All de niggers cheer and say dey want to stay, but Marse die not long after and all us
93 For negative perceptions of turpentine work, see Cassandra Y. Johnson and Josh McDaniel, “Turpentine Negro,”
in To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History, ed. by Dianne D. Glave and
94 TAS Vol. 10, pt. 6, p. 70.
his army earnings. Nelson left his family for Arkansas in 1867, where he married and built a life before migrating to Minnesota in 1908.95

It is hard to know exactly how freedpeople balanced local community connections against the pull of distant places, but the evidence suggests kinship kept some people tied to places they would otherwise have preferred to leave. Once death or conflict attenuated those ties, migration suddenly became a more appealing possibility. Historians of Reconstruction-era black politics often gesture toward the local and the grassroots as the source of black political power, but the dynamics of migration suggest that, for many freedpeople, maintaining kinship networks and building local communities did not always appear the best way to improve social conditions.96 Rather than local stability, mobile freedpeople prioritized a geopolitical worldview that incorporated distant places.

Even when there were instances of conflict in local communities, however, migrating away from known people and places entailed risks and hardships. And even when migrants had kinship connections in their new destinations, migration meant integrating into a new community. Building relationships in a new locale allowed migrating freedpeople to re-anchor their world. In this, postemancipation free migration had some similarities to and drew upon enslaved people’s experiences of forced migration. The dynamics of the slave trade had made black families into adaptable and flexible institutions. Because of the nearly constant traffic of newcomers brought by the slave trade, enslaved communities, argues historian Anthony Kaye,

96 Migration is disruptive to scholarly interpretations of postemancipation black life because it complicates ideas of kinship and local politics, though I do not mean to displace or discount the importance of local politics. Instead I posit that migration adds a layer of complexity by suggesting that not all politics were, in fact, local. For accounts focused on community and the grassroots in Reconstruction era black life and politics, see Tera W. Hunter, Michael W. Fitzgerald, Steven Hahn, Laura F. Edwards, Susan O’Donovan, Justin Behrend, and Dylan Penningroth.
“were in a constant state of making, remaking, and becoming.”97 But this was not a sign of weakness in black communities. Instead, the need for kinship structures and communities to adapt to migration created unique social formations. Kaye suggests such formations were “works of ingenuity.”98 Even when noting the flexibility of enslaved kinship structures, however, scholars have posited that forced migrants faced challenges of integrating into new communities. Damian Alan Pargas, for instance, argues that forced migration brought enslaved people into “confrontation with complete strangers…[and] often served to compound the trauma of removal and deportation.”99

Indeed, postwar migrants espoused some of the same regional chauvinisms Pargas points to as a barrier to enslaved folks’ efforts at integration in their new locales.100 Lizzie Barnett, who migrated to Arkansas after the Civil War, appeared to look down on those who had been reared on the frontier. “I want you to know I am not an Arkansas born nigger,” she told an interviewer in the 1930s. “I come down from Tennessee. Be sure you put that down.”101 Perhaps her hostility was defensive. Lewis Mann felt it was important to differentiate himself as a native Arkansan from those who came later. In contrast to Barnett, Mann told his interviewer, “I’m tellin’ you the truf. I ain’t just come here now. I was born right here in Arkansas.”102

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97 Kaye, Joining Places, p. 5.
98 Kaye, Joining Places, p. 54.
100 Pargas, Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South, pp. 219-224. Litwack notes that, after emancipation, newcomers sometimes raised community tensions. He notes that, “in southern cities in the post–Civil War years, black residents of long standing tended to give new arrivals a mixed reception, even sharing at times with the whites a disdain for the rustic manners, crude lifestyles, and shabby attire of the newcomers.” It might be that such disdain was a product of rural-to-urban migrations, especially. Litwack, Been in the Storm so Long, p. 315.
101 TAS Vol. 8, pt. 1, p. 113.
102 It is interesting how freedpeople kept up such feelings of regional chauvinism even after years in a different state. Issabella Boyd, for instance, came to Texas with her owner prior to emancipation, but she made fun of her husband’s place of birth (South Carolina) and the Texans around her. She “allus said Virginn de best, ’cause I come from dere.” TAS Vol. 4, pt. 1, p. 116.
Nevertheless, with emancipation, freedpeople could begin to build institutions that made integrating into new communities a less intimidating prospect, though the flexibility of enslaved kinship structures likely remained an advantage as freedpeople adapted to new communities through postemancipation migrations. In this process of community integration, we see hints of how migration began to forge a wider identity and consciousness among freedpeople. All the letter writing, visiting, return migration, and other means of exchanging information made distant places more familiar and made more obvious the similarities to and alignments with the people in those places. As geopolitical information and kinship networks expanded, a freed person in Georgia was able to imagine a community in the Southwest not only as a place with occupational opportunities, but also as a place with a knowable (and agreeable) community. Marriage and family formation anchored many newcomers into their new communities, and more formal institutions, including churches, benevolent societies, and black businesses, operated to make integration an easier process. In the Reconstruction era, migration and its information networks made distant places familiar and transformed strangers into community members.

Marriage formed the basis of integration for many migrants; marrying into local families, rather than marrying other migrants, gave newcomers access to social networks in their new homes, and it helped overcome the (sometimes strong) desire to return to their old homes. That is exactly how migration and integration worked for Giles Smith. He had signed up with a man named Frank Talbot, who was looking to bring laborers from Alabama to the Brazos River bottoms in Texas. The move, however, made Smith “lonesome,” and if he had been close enough to home to return easily, he “sho’ gone back to the old plantation.” Instead, he stayed on with Talbot for two years before going to work at a cotton gin in Brownwood, Texas. There Smith
met Dee, “and after dat [he] don’t care to go back to Alabama so hard.” For Smith, following work opportunities led to finding a wife in his post-migration home. For others, marriage led to employment. Virgil Jones, for instance, had escaped slavery in Alabama and enlisted in the U.S. Army during the war. After mustering out, he headed to Arkansas, where he married a woman, Jane, who had been “in this state before the war.” Jane had stayed with her former owners, and when she and Virgil married, he took a job with them, too. The Joneses then kept the same employment for more than twenty years, in which time they had six children. Marriage to a member of his new community let Virgil build relations of kinship and labor in Arkansas.

Mary Ellen Stubbs provides a more suggestive example of how labor and community institutions shaped migrants’ integration. Stubbs and her parents moved to Arkansas from Mississippi in the winter of 1880. They “made a crop” and attended church, where Mary “got to know” William Brown. He had been born enslaved right there in Cross County, and eventually became the preacher of the A.M.E. church. Mary and William married, and they farmed for twelve years before William entered the ministry; by 1930 the two had moved about but stayed within Arkansas, where they owned a house valued at $1,500.

Mary and William met at a church, which her parents began attending shortly after arriving in Cross County. As community gathering places, and ones welcoming of newcomers, churches

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103 TAS Vol. 5, pt. 4, pp. 31-32.
104 TAS Vol. 9, pt. 4, p. 169; 1880 Federal Census, Jackson township, Monroe County, Arkansas.
105 TAS Vol. 8, pt. 1, pp. 317-21. Their house in 1930 was in Little Rock. I have not been able to find Stubbs and Brown in other census years yet. 1930 Federal Census, Little Rock, Pulaski County, Arkansas. Cross County, where Stubbs’s parents “made a crop” in 1880, is on the Memphis to Little Rock Road, a military road constructed in the 1830s. It was a primary route of westward migration through Arkansas, and it seems that she was just passing through before she met William. The wording is suggestive: “They stopped in our county and attended our church. I met her that way.” This example indicates something about how piecemeal migrations worked. The people who said things like “I came here in 1880. Stopped and worked along the way” might not have had firm destinations in mind. They followed typical routes (via road, rail, and water) and looked for opportunities along the way. Larger and better-known places would have been the background draw (Little Rock, Memphis, Houston, etc), but the migrants found themselves checking out locales along the way and, in some instances, remaining there rather than making their way to the original destination.
provided a framework for integration. Benevolent societies did so as well, especially in urban areas. In Little Rock, for instance, black leaders organized the Colored Immigration Aid Society for the County of Pulaski. The society’s stated purpose was to advertise Arkansas to black migrants, but it likely also played a role in helping freedpeople settle in the area. One of the society’s members, Conway Barbour, had arrived in Arkansas in 1869 and set up a labor exchange to help black immigrants find land and employment. For a freed person in Georgia considering a move to Arkansas, knowledge that such organizations existed made migration less intimidating because it made the destination more known. Coupled with knowledge of the place came assurance of community, and once a migrant arrived, local institutions helped them integrate.

Conclusion: Geopolitical Literacy in the Reconstruction Era

Geopolitical knowledge reshaped black communities in the era of Reconstruction, and opportunities for migration, whether taken or not, contributed to keeping kinship networks in a state of flux. But all the moving about had reconfigured communication networks and had mapped spaces of danger and exploitation, opportunity and belonging. Freedpeople shared this knowledge among themselves, passing along news from relatives in distant places, or rumors they picked up by way of labor recruiters. Some warned each other away from certain places. This shared knowledge, to return to Troutman’s concept of geopolitical literacy, is what allowed freedpeople to “write” on their landscapes, and it signifies an important mode of political knowledge and action in the era of Reconstruction.

The migration history of the Payne family illustrates how kinship and information networks shaped freedpeople’s geopolitical literacy and migration decisions. The WPA testimony comes from Larkin Payne, who was born enslaved in North Carolina in 1853. After emancipation, his parents moved to East Tennessee and farmed for a while. They had an extensive kinship network in the area and back in North Carolina, and somehow, they “heard that the Ku Klux was bad down in Alabama.” They waited until they heard the violence had “settled down,” and then they moved about four hundred miles to Marion County, Alabama, in the early 1870s. They moved as a large kinship community and did well as small farmers in the area. Larkin’s older brothers John and James both owned some land. Larkin married an Alabama-born woman in about 1872, and in 1880 he seems to have rented about eight acres and owned a horse and some chickens. In the following years, Larkin built up enough wealth to buy a house and trade it for stock that he sold to finance a move to Arkansas, which he heard was “fine farmin’ country.” They moved to Arkansas sometime between 1889 and 1900, and Larkin brought his parents along, though other kinfolk remained in Alabama. After Larkin’s parents died, he and his wife remained in Arkansas.

By 1900 the Payne family had a kinship network that stretched from Arkansas to Alabama to East Tennessee, and they had made two major migrations based on having “heard” about opportunities elsewhere. They had also heard of distant dangers and forestalled their move to Alabama based on information about racial violence there. Once in Alabama, however, Larkin had quickly married a local woman, and perhaps he helped anchor his kinfolk to the local community; integration into the community in Alabama, in turn, made possible a subsequent
migration to Arkansas. For the Paynes, geopolitical literacy and migration clearly played a major role in shaping their postemancipation life. 107

As geopolitical knowledge circulated, it took on a political importance beyond the scope of individual kinship networks. In Marion County, the Paynes encountered the wider political context of black migration. Knowledge of working conditions and wages in other places aided freedpeople in local struggles for better working conditions. In 1871, around the time the Paynes arrived in Alabama, freedpeople in Marion County formed a labor union to agitate for better sharecropping contracts. Rather than propose a general strike or an armed confrontation, however, the union held out emigration as a threat to white planters. 108 Given that the Paynes settled in the county, it seems likely the threat worked and conditions improved, though clearly, news of good land and higher wages in other places circulated through Marion County years before the Paynes ever left it for Arkansas. Freedpeople in Georgia likewise saw and exploited a link between emigration to Arkansas and local contract terms in 1869, 1871, and 1873. 109

107 TAS Vol. 10, pt. 5, pp. 306-07. It seems Larkin had three brothers (or half-brothers) who were involved in the Civil War, though probably as laborers not soldiers (he calls them “helpers”). Census, 1870, Greene County, Tennessee; 1880, Marion County, Alabama, 1900, Wheatley, Arkansas (Larkin, Lorkin, Lark, Payne/Paine). Larkin’s oldest child was born in Alabama in 1872, so his family moved there sometime between 1870 and 1872. His youngest child was born in Alabama in 1889, so they did not move to Arkansas until sometime after 1889 (they show up in the 1900 census, but they are not lucky enough to make it into the mostly-destroyed 1890 census).
108 Cohen, At Freedom’s Edge, p. 16.
109 The evidence here is not quite so explicit as to show freedpeople using the threat of emigration to negotiate terms, but under the title “THE NEGROES REFUSE TO MAKE CONTRACTS,” the Macon, Georgia Weekly Telegraph saw a link between those holding out to sign labor contracts and the threat of emigration to Arkansas. The article’s author noted that “there is a very general disinclination on the part of the freedmen to resume work on the plantations. Almost every night witnesses the departure of large numbers from this and other portions of the State, en route for Arkansas.” The author suggested that unscrupulous planters, who attempted to cheat freedpeople out of their pay, were in part to blame for the so-called “hegira.” The article, perhaps echoing the complaints of those who refused to work while considering emigration, called on “All good men” to “join hands to frown down and crush out all this unfair treatment of the laborer, and no law can be enacted too severe for its punishment.” The article also suggested increasing efforts to attract white immigrants to replace emigrating freedpeople, a theme explored in Chapter 3. Weekly Telegraph, Jan. 14, 1873, p. 6. For similar examples from 1869 and 1871, see Joseph P. Reidy, From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880 (Chapel Hill, 1992), p. 230. Reidy notes that the 1869 effort was organized in association with the Colored National Labor Union “and its search to improve the status of southern black workers.” Others observed the local effects of black migration, remarking that emigration seemed to play a role in improving race and labor relations in some regions.
Freedpeople’s geopolitical networks, which carried information about conditions elsewhere, shaped local political struggles such that even a decision to stay put sometimes required broader geographical knowledge. For freedpeople in the era of Reconstruction, knowledge of distant places and the ability to migrate sometimes worked to re-center their existing home and to deepen local social and political commitments.\footnote{Charles Nordhoff, traveling through Georgia in July 1875, remarked that “better sentiment” between planters and freedpeople was “caused, in part at least, by the fact that planters in such localities see their laboring force removing to other States.” Nordhoff, \textit{The Cotton States in the Spring and Summer of 1875} (New York, 1876), p. 104.}

The migratory and kinship networks explored in this chapter shaped the way information circulated through freedpeople’s communities. Migration knitted together distant communities, and the information of distant places that circulated through freedpeople’s communities informed their political orientations and actions, both locally and in the wider world. As the case study in the following chapter demonstrates, the individual networks and nascent political consciousnesses created by postwar migration made possible concerted emigration efforts among black leaders. The geopolitical communications network, the grapevine, provided a distribution system for these emigration-related messages, and sometimes such messages were highly coordinated and finely crafted. By conveying geographical knowledge in the Reconstruction era, the grapevine helped to both develop and distribute geographical visions of freedom and belonging. One such effort, coordinated by leaders in Arkansas and built around the idea of natural abundance in the trans-Mississippi Southwest as the basis for racial equality in an integrated democracy, sustained a movement of about two hundred thousand formerly enslaved people in the decades following emancipation.

\footnote{White reactions to the political threat of black migration are explored in chapter 3.}
Henry McNeal Turner did not think highly of Arkansas in February 1867. In an article addressed “to the colored citizens of Georgia,” Turner laid out his opposition to black migration to Arkansas. A “false idea has usurped the throne of your better judgment,” he told prospective migrants, and he worked to convince them that Georgia was the place to be. “Georgia is the Empire State of the South,” he wrote. “Her productive resources are inexhaustible; her climate is both pleasant and healthy; her railroads net her cities, towns, and villages together with a marvellous [sic] facility.” After listing the advantages of Georgia, Turner turned his attention to Arkansas. Referencing the overwrought tales used by western labor recruiters, Turner admonished, “I do not believe the tenth part of the fabulous stories about the West, which works as a talisman on our people.” And reflecting on the relative health of the country, Turner saw “no necessity of us exposing our lives to the malaria of...Arkansas swamps, to clear up lands that will do us no good.” In drawing a direct contrast between the development of Georgia and the unsettled nature of Arkansas, Turner declared migration to Arkansas “destructive” to “the advancement of my people.”

Two decades later, Turner had an about-face. In a very different editorial, this one published in the *Christian Recorder*, he wrote, “Arkansas is destined to be the great Negro State of the country. The rich lands, the health by regions, the meagre [sic] prejudice compared to some states and opportunities to acquire wealth all conspire to make it inviting to the colored man.” From highlighting malarial swamps and uncleared land to championing the richness of

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land and the salubrity of climate: Arkansas’s place in Turner’s worldview had flipped. “This is the State,” he concluded, “for colored men who wish to live by their own merits.”

The twenty-one years between Turner’s editorials saw dramatic demographic and political transformations in Arkansas, made possible, in part, by the streams of migration Turner initially worked so hard to stop. The state’s black population in 1870 was 122,169. By 1890, it was 309,117, and the resulting rate of increase in the black population, at 46.7 percent, surpassed all other southern states in the 1880s. With demographic majorities in eastern Arkansas counties and composing about a quarter of the population throughout the state, African Americans achieved a relatively high level of political involvement, particularly at county-level elected positions. Even after Democrats regained control of Arkansas 1874, African Americans remained active voters and continued to hold elective offices, and they used that power to steer freedpeople from elsewhere in the South toward Arkansas. Indeed, both before and after redemption, Arkansas had a well-organized and vigorous network of black leaders and institutions aimed at attracting black migration to the state. In its broadest outlines this network comprised elected and appointed officials at federal, state, and local positions, benevolent societies, business ventures and entrepreneurs, state fairs, and church leaders. Exploring this network provides a unique way to examine the politics of black migration in the era of Reconstruction.

This chapter focuses on two aspects of postwar black migration to Arkansas. First it explores the network of people and institutions that worked to induce black migration to

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3 Much of the historiography on black migration focuses on local leaders who lacked access to traditional forms of political power, and so those works explore grassroots approaches to organized emigration movements, such as the actions of Henry Adams in building interest in and organizing people during the Kansas Exodus, as explored by Nell Irvin Painter and Henry Adams, or the back-to-Africa movement of Chief Sam, as studied by Kendra Taira Field. Arkansas’s pro-immigration leaders, in contrast, were able to use official avenues of state power to anchor their messages and efforts. They made immigration a central part of building a postemancipation regime in Arkansas.
Arkansas. This network was highly organized and composed of private and public institutions; for Arkansas’s black leaders, migration, as a means of community building, was directly linked to issues of citizenship and equal rights. But to quell the concerns of white conservatives who viewed black immigration as threatening because it swelled the ranks of Republican voters, black leaders often portrayed their efforts to attract freedpeople as a central means of postwar state development. By doing so, they were able to align their interests with white Republicans from 1868 to 1873, and, after 1874, with white conservatives, all of whom were interested in developing Arkansas into a leading state of the New South economy. For Arkansas’s black leaders, then, migration was a way to construct a black body politic (their particular aim) by way of reconstructing the state’s economy (a universal aim).4

The chapter also examines the idea of Arkansas used to attract migrants, with the aim of recreating the intellectual and geographical frameworks that sustained postwar black migration. In the main, those who spread word of Arkansas pulled on and helped perpetuate ideas about slavery’s legacy of land use to highlight the “new” and “fertile” land of Arkansas, helping construct, as they did so, a comparative geography that suggested black freedom and citizenship were more possible in some places than others.5 I argue in this chapter, therefore, that black

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4 This chapter is indebted to and guided by the excellent work done by Story Matkin-Rawn, who argues that black immigration had an immense impact on the shape of Reconstruction in Arkansas. My work diverges from Matkin-Rawn’s in a number of ways. First I attempt to more thoroughly reconstruct the network of people and institutions that worked to attract black migrants to Arkansas, focusing on the careers of William H. Grey and Mifflin W. Gibbs to ground the movement in black political and intellectual history rather than to emphasize the role of labor recruiters. Second, I use the example of Arkansas to explore what I call the creation of a “comparative geography” that linked place to political potentialities; this geographical knowledge helped freedpeople critique some places and landscapes, and it helped them construct aspirational ideas of other places. Story Matkin-Rawn, “‘The Great Negro State of the Country’: Arkansas’s Reconstruction and the Other Great Migration,” Arkansas Historical Quarterly 72.1 (Spring 2013).

5 I propose use of the idea of comparative geography to turn attention to the material basis of postwar black migration to highlight how geographical knowledge shaped ideas of freedom, citizenship, and identity in postwar black politics. In doing so, I depart from the two current trends in the study of black migration after emancipation. These two trends are the transnational turn and kinship migration, the first characterized in works by Michael P. Johnson, Steven Hahn, and Kendra T. Fields; the second is represented by more recent works by Heather Andrea
migration to Arkansas was motivated by an ideology that linked the material conditions of Arkansas’s environment to the possibilities of black freedom and citizenship. Natural abundance and fertile soil factored into migrants’ decision to move to Arkansas more than other social or cultural factors, such as schools, black institutions, or Republican Party politics. The idea of fertile soil yielding stable societies emerged from antebellum agrarian ideology and slave-based experiential beliefs that slavery had ruined the environment in other parts of the South. Black leaders in Arkansas understood and expanded this environmental and geographical critique of the legacy of slavery, and it became the primary argument they used to induce black migrants to move to Arkansas. That the message resonated so widely with migrants, moreover, reflects that the idea of slavery’s environmental legacy circulated through both elite and popular channels, and that an ideology of black freedom and citizenship based on a comparative geography and activated by migration was an important thread of black political thought in the era of Reconstruction. Long before reaching it, Arkansas was a place in migrants’ minds, a place that helped them critique their current location and helped them envision a postemancipation future. Migration, for these freedpeople, was a direct means of reshaping the potentialities of their world.

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For much of its antebellum history as a U.S. territory and state, Arkansas was a peripheral frontier, relatively unpenetrated by the slave-based cotton economy in comparison with other southern states. Though brought under the domain of the United States by the Louisiana Purchase, Arkansas remained a territory until 1836, and its population and economy grew slowly. By 1840 the total population of the state was just 97,574 with 19,935 enslaved people. The same census, in contrast, enumerated a total population of 375,651 and 195,211 enslaved people.

Williams and Abigail Cooper. This is also to suggest that postwar migration should be considered as part of African American and Reconstruction-era environmental history, growing though still marginal subfields.
people in Mississippi. Most of Arkansas’s free and enslaved population clung to the eastern counties of the state, settling along the alluvial bottom lands bordering the Mississippi River. But though the fertility of the land rivaled that of the Alabama Black Belt, it remained largely uncleared and unplanted. In 1850, Arkansas’s population grew to 209,897 with 47,100 enslaved, and by 1860, those numbers rose to a total population of 435,450 and an enslaved population of 111,115. Of the 11,481 slaveholders in Arkansas, only 1,363 owned 20 or more slaves by 1860.\(^6\) Arkansas was clearly on its way to becoming an important slave state, but it still lagged far behind other states of the Old Southwest; even Missouri had a larger population of enslaved people on the eve of the Civil War.\(^7\)

Compared with other southern states, Arkansas emerged from the Civil War in an advantageous position. Its marginal economic role in the antebellum economy and its location on the periphery of the war’s main theaters meant physical and governmental infrastructures were mostly intact. Second only to securing readmission to the Union, state leaders were eager to grow the state’s economy by developing its resources. Isaac Murphy, a unionist Democrat who had voted against Arkansas’s ordinance of secession when elected governor in 1861 and had fled the state in 1862, returned to Arkansas with the Union army of General Frederick Steele in September 1863. By the next April, Murphy again assumed the governorship, bolstered by a unionist coalition and the power of an occupying army. Despite bouts of violence and opposition from unreconstructed Confederates—most of whom were disqualified from voting or holding office because they could not pass the test oath—Murphy’s Unionist party met in convention in

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Little Rock in August 1865 and produced a party platform aimed at establishing a working government suitable for readmission to the union. The platform endorsed the abolition of slavery but demurred on taking a stance on black suffrage; primarily it established a route toward the economic reconstruction of the state, proposing policies aimed at funding internal improvements and, noting the shortage of labor in the state, encouraging immigration. Democratic leaders opposed to the Unionist platform soon organized a Conservative party that raised the specter of race war and positioned themselves as allies of the Johnson administration. Despite the disqualification of voters sympathetic to the Conservative party, the opposition was enough to produce a contested election that robbed the Unionist government of legitimacy.8

The Conservatives gained power over the next year. They canvassed the state, telling voters that they, and not the Unionists, were the true friends of Johnson and could secure the state’s readmission. They appealed to white supremacy, promising to regulate free labor while opposing civil and political rights for freedpeople. Their support grew. By summer 1866 only one newspaper in the state supported the Unionist party, and in the election that August, Conservatives swept the state. Arkansas’s antebellum elite thus controlled the sixteenth general assembly (November 1866 to March 1867), and they used the legislature to secure their property and to establish a labor system that worked in the favor of landowners. Members of the Conservative assembly worked hard to shore up their prewar position, but they, too, looked toward the state’s future, passing laws aimed at encouraging economic development. Their plans, however, were cut short by the advent of Congressional Reconstruction. With the Conservatives’ power attenuated, a reorganized coalition of Unionists, former Whigs, and Republicans took on a

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8 For discussion of the ways in which the legitimacy of southern state constitutional conventions and elections were impacted by voter turnout and questions of representation and who counted as “the people” during Reconstruction, see Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, 2014), pp. 81-179.
more radical cast while reconstructing the state. For pragmatic black leaders, the lessons of the Conservative and Unionist platforms were clear: even the more conservative coalition had prioritized development and called for legislation that was pro-immigration (though not explicitly aiming at black migrants).  

Operating under the Reconstruction Acts, lawmakers convened in Little Rock on January 7, 1868, to write a new constitution for the state. Of the seventy-five delegates, eight were black men, and though their role was marginal compared with their white counterparts, the convention offered the first platform for publicly advocating efforts to encourage black immigration. William Henry Grey and James T. White emerged as the most active leaders of black politics in Arkansas, and, perhaps because they were themselves both recent migrants to the state, they set about organizing what would become an extensive and long-lived network aimed at encouraging black migration to Arkansas. Grey was likely born in Washington, D.C., in 1820, and he appears to have been born free; he may have been the illegitimate son of Virginia congressman and later governor Henry A. Wise. At the very least, Grey and Wise were close. As a child, Grey often accompanied Wise to the House of Representatives.  

Grey moved progressively westward, first to Cincinnati and then to St. Louis before making his way to Helena, Arkansas, in 1865. White was born free in New Providence, Indiana, in 1837. He joined the Baptist church in 1854 and was ordained a minister in 1858. In 1865 White attended the Consolidated American

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9 In 1865 state leaders from both the unionist and conservative camps founded the Arkansas Immigrant Aid Society. Members included Governor Murphy, future governor Powell Clayton, and Edward Gantt, a former confederate officer. Though the society functioned long enough to publish a pamphlet that advertised the state’s resources and advantages, the varied political leanings of the group’s members could not survive the contentious 1866 election, and the group attracted too few members for a working quorum that November. See Beverly Watkins, “Efforts to Encourage Immigration to Arkansas, 1865–1874,” Arkansas Historical Quarterly 38.1 (Spring 1979): 34-6.  

10 Tom W. Dillard, University of Central Arkansas historian and archivist, notes that “there is considerable circumstantial evidence” that William Henry Grey was Henry Wise’s son. Wise freed only one slave, named Elizabeth Gray [sic], who had two children (one of which was William Henry Grey); the middle name Henry suggests a link to Henry Wise; and William H. Grey was undoubtedly of mixed race and was born free. See article by Dillard, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Dec. 28, 2003.
Baptist Convention in St. Louis, where he was called to serve the Second Baptist Church in Helena. By late 1865 White and Grey were both living in Arkansas, and they threw themselves into the politics of Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{11} That November, White presided over a Convention of Colored Citizens, held in Little Rock. Grey arrived at the convention a day late but secured his position as chairman of the finance committee and delivered a lengthy address on “the present condition and future prospects of the colored people of the South.” The convention, guided by Grey and White, went on to release a list of resolutions endorsing equal rights, black suffrage, and fair terms of labor. In a passage that foreshadowed future arguments used to bolster efforts favoring black immigration, the convention declared that “we are the substrata, the foundation on which the future power and wealth of the State of Arkansas must be built.”\textsuperscript{12} Free black people, the convention made clear, would be essential to the postwar development of Arkansas.

Grey and White both won election as delegates to represent Phillips County in the constitutional convention. Grey seems to have played the most active role, however, serving on various committees and challenging white delegates on matters of aid to former slaves, discrimination on public transportation, and miscegenation laws. The Little Rock \textit{Daily Republican} later noted that, at the convention, Grey “made his mark, and was certainly deemed the ablest debater in the body.”\textsuperscript{13} Grey addressed the convention at length on January 13, taking the opportunity to lay out a coherent political program that united protections for equal rights, black migration, and the development of the state’s resources. Grey bemoaned the oppression of formerly enslaved people and the underdevelopment of Arkansas, blaming both on the legacy of slavery. He urged his listeners to “Settle once and forever this question of human rights giving us

\textsuperscript{11} It’s unclear whether Grey and White were acquainted before arriving in Helena, Arkansas, around the same time.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Proceedings of the Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of Arkansas, Held in Little Rock, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, Nov. 30, Dec. 1 and 2, 1865}.
\textsuperscript{13} Little Rock \textit{Daily Republican}, Feb. 5, 1873, p. 2.
equality before the law….Until that is done capital will not seek investment within our limits, nor will immigration flow to a State that continues to oppress and crush the laborer.” Without equality for former slaves, Grey went on, Arkansas will remain “a vast forest” with “not a railroad with the name, [and] no means of inter-communication.” Former slaves still faced oppression, and Arkansas’s development was lagging behind. Grey offered a fix for both. Reconstructing the state, he suggested, would come from turning its forests into farms and its waterways into avenues of commerce; by engaging in these activities, moreover, former slaves would also transform themselves into productive citizens. He went on to suggest that migration was the engine of transformation for both Arkansas and black citizens. Together they would remake themselves and the nation.14

Grey’s eloquence and influence at the constitutional convention earned him a seat as a representative for the 1868 General Assembly. He was joined by James T. White and James W. Mason, both of whom had also been among the eight black delegates to the constitutional convention. White joined Grey in the house, while Mason won election as a senator. In the legislature, as they had in the convention, they continued to push for measures ensuring equal civil and political rights for black Arkansans. Though most of the legislative session was taken up with more routine matters of restructuring the laws of the postwar state, Grey, Mason, and White helped push the legislature toward the unanimous adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment and the creation of a public education system for African Americans.15

The same general assembly, spurred by Governor Powell Clayton, worked to formalize the state’s immigration machinery. Clayton, in his address to the legislature on July 4, 1868, suggested that “We should invite all classes to come here and we should greet every one with a cordial welcome.” Though not yet explicitly calling for black migration, Clayton emphasized his government’s commitment to “guaranteeing upon the soil of Arkansas equal rights to all men,” and he told the legislators he expected them to “establish a liberal and vigorous bureau of immigration.” Within nine days, both houses had approved a bill to create the position of commissioner of immigration and state lands, to be appointed by the governor with consent of the senate.

It is unclear what role Grey, White, or Mason played in crafting the bill that created the commissioner of immigration in 1868, but given their later support of immigration-related legislation, it is likely they were encouraged by the governor’s zeal. In the House, White and Grey both voted in favor of the bill. White and Mason were both elected to the state senate in 1870, and White took a number of immigration-related actions during the session of 1871. He proposed and pushed through a bill, which Mason supported, to amend the 1868 act that created the commissioner of immigration. White’s bill aimed to enlarge the powers and duties of the state’s immigration office by appointing an assistant commissioner to oversee efforts to induce

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17 “Act to provide for the appointment of a commissioner of immigration and State lands, and defining the duties of that officer,” July 15, 1868, quoted in Felton D. Freeman, “Immigration to Arkansas,” Arkansas Historical Quarterly 7.3 (Autumn 1948), pp. 211-212. Despite the quick action by the legislature, and the appointment of Clayton loyalist James M. Lewis as commissioner of immigration and state lands, Arkansas’s immigration efforts stalled out in 1868 due to widespread violence associated with the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. Clayton declared martial law in a number of counties in November 1868. See Watkins, “Efforts to Encourage Immigration to Arkansas,” pp. 45-6.
19 Satcher, “Black Pioneers in Arkansas Politics 1865-1876.”
black immigration. As White wrote in a letter to the editor of the Little Rock Daily Republican, the assistant commissioner’s “sole business shall be to travel for the purpose of securing immigration of colored persons to our State.” Appealing to ideas of climate, race, and labor, White went on to suggest that black immigration was essential to the development of Arkansas’s agricultural interests, warning that without it, much of the state would remain “scarcely more advanced in cultivation than was the case when Columbus discovered America.” In these efforts White had the support of Governor Clayton, who had used his address to the general assembly that year to call explicitly for increased attention to attracting black migrants to Arkansas. Clayton, in a passage designed to appeal to both conservative planters and his Republican supporters (black and white), “suggest[ed] the employment by the state of an agent to visit the older states, with the view of bringing colored people here. Aside from other considerations, the development and increase of the agricultural resources of our state are so dependent upon the colored man, that any plan that can be adopted to increase the producing elements, cannot but be a source of good.” White lobbied hard for his bill, becoming “unruly”

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20 Arkansas Gazette, Jan. 17, 1871. For White’s various motions to introduce his immigration bill, see Journal of the Senate of Arkansas, Eighteenth Session, Begun at the Capitol, in Little Rock, on the Second Day of January, A.D. 1871 (Little Rock, Ark., 1871), pp. 10, 66, 224, 226, 291. Mason’s vote for the bill is recorded on p. 291. Unfortunately the senate journal does not contain transcripts of the full bill and does not contain a record of the debate surrounding bills.

21 Little Rock Daily Republican, Feb. 15, 1871. The theme of migration being shaped by race, climate, crop, and region is explored more fully in the following chapter.

22 Journal of the Senate of Arkansas, Eighteenth Session, pp. 23-4. Clayton, along with White, sought to attract black migrants in opposition to a planter-aligned conservative plan to bring Chinese laborers into Arkansas in 1869 and 1870. Arkansas planters were a driving force behind a Chinese Immigration Convention held in Memphis in July 1869, and by sending agents to China, they managed to bring about 220 Chinese immigrants to Arkansas. As it did in other parts of the South, however, the movement soon fell apart; Republicans denounced Chinese immigration as unfree labor, and the movement was too short lived to offset the deep seated racialized connection among black bodies, hot climates, and cotton labor. This connection, while detrimental in its long-term effects of linking black workers with unskilled farm labor in the South, became a central argument used by black immigration recruiters, who played to planters’ racism by perpetuating the idea that only African-descended people could remain healthy and work efficiently in the humid alluvial plains of the Mississippi Delta. For more on Arkansas planters’ efforts to bring in Chinese laborers, see Clayton, Aftermath of the Civil War, in Arkansas, pp. 212-14; Matkin-Rawn, “The Great Negro State of the Country,” pp. 17-18. For discussion of the wider political debate over Chinese immigration and the specter of unfree labor, see Moon-Ho Jung, “Outlawing ‘Coolies’: Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation,” American Quarterly 57.3 (September 2005), pp. 677-701.
until it passed the Senate after the third reading, but the House sank the bill in committee review, and it never became law.\(^{23}\)

By that point, however, Arkansas’s black immigration network had grown considerably. In mid-1869, Conway Barbour, a black hotel proprietor from Illinois, toured Arkansas and reported that the state was “offering great inducements to immigrants.” By that fall, Barbour was living in Little Rock and had set up a labor exchange to help black immigrants find land and employment, and he soon became a leader of Arkansas’s black immigrationists. In January 1870, while conservative planters considered the question of Chinese immigration, Barbour and other prominent radical Republicans—black and white, and including Commissioner of Immigration and State Lands James M. Lewis—met at the colored Baptist Church of Little Rock to form the Colored Immigration Aid Association of the County of Pulaski. The association pledged itself to promoting black migration to Arkansas, arguing that, as Grey had suggested during the constitutional convention, such immigration was necessary to developing the resources of the state and would provide a mechanism for helping freedpeople build a firm material basis from which to pursue inclusion in the body politic.\(^{24}\) Interestingly, Arkansas’s main Democratic paper, the *Gazette*, offered support for the association, declaring “Give us the Negro, in preference to the Chinaman, for the present until we see whether the Chinaman will do or not.”\(^{25}\) The association’s by-laws committed it to fundraising and regular meetings, but no additional evidence indicates that the association met again.

Less than a year later, however, while White’s bill was making its way through the senate, “a large meeting of colored citizens was held” at Little Rock’s city hall. William Grey,

\(^{23}\) Arkansas *Gazette*, April 19, 1871. It is not clear whether house opposition to the bill was due to its emphasis on attracting black immigration per se, or due to the $3,000 burden for the assistant commissioner’s salary.

\(^{24}\) Little Rock *Daily Republican*, Jan. 13, 1870.

\(^{25}\) Arkansas *Gazette*, Jan. 14, 1870.
James Mason, and James White were joined by Tabbs Gross, H. B. Robinson, E. A. Fulton, and J. T. Jenifer, all of whom became involved in immigration-related efforts. The meeting produced a set of five resolutions related to voting and representation, education, endorsing White as a candidate for the U.S. Senate, and “approving of the efforts to secure colored immigration to the State.” Such efforts were becoming a mainstay of black political activism in Arkansas.

White, who had come to Arkansas as a minister, and had perhaps coordinated the Colored Immigration Aid Association’s use of the Baptist church as a meeting space, helped steer the First Missionary Baptist Convention of Arkansas toward immigration-related efforts in the months after his bill failed to pass the General Assembly. In a move that demonstrates the flexibility of pragmatic black leaders to work through public or private channels as circumstances allowed, the convention’s “committee on the country” (of which White was a member) released a report recognizing that political and material conditions were not equal throughout the South. “The only feasible remedies for these evils,” the committee stated, were for freedpeople to engage in “immigration to the new states.” The committee resolved that “our ministers should, as a matter of religious duty, devote a portion of their time to the work of instructing their people in reference to these important matters.” James White had led the Baptist convention to adopt efforts to encourage black migration as a sacred imperative.

Arkansas’s black leaders did not confine their activities to creating associations and writing resolutions in Arkansas. In October 1871, William Grey, John H. Johnson, and H. B. Robinson served as the Arkansas delegation to the Southern States Convention of Colored Men, held in Columbia, South Carolina. Grey, as usual, was the most active throughout the

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26 Little Rock Daily Republican, March 13, 1871.
27 Little Rock Daily Republican, July 25, 1871.
28 For an overview of the place of this convention in the context of Reconstruction-era black politics and the colored conventions movement more broadly, see Luis-Alejandro Dinnella-Borrego, The Risen Phoenix: Black Politics in
convention, offering strong resolutions in support of President Ulysses S. Grant seeking a second term and arguing that the southern freedpeople needed to remain committed to the Republican Party platform. Grey also secured appointment to the convention’s committee on emigration, as did John Johnson, giving Arkansas two out of eight positions on the committee.

On the fifth day of the convention, the committee on emigration released its report. Recognizing that the Fourteenth Amendment secured their right to move anywhere within the United States but arguing that the “South holds out the greatest advantages to the colored people of this country,” the committee endorsed the idea of intra-South migration. The committee reported that two states offered particular inducements to immigration: Florida and Arkansas, with the latter receiving the most thorough explanation and endorsement. The committee referred to John H. Johnson as a land agent from Arkansas and reported that, in that state, “Lands can be secured for seventy-five cents to one dollar per acre. The fertility of the land in the State is beyond doubt; a climate mild and delightful, with every Southern production. The homestead laws of Congress confer, all the advantages to the immigrants. The agents of the State administration are willing to give any information, and pay half the expenses of transportation to the state….There are no barriers in this State against securing lands under any circumstances.”

The committee sharply contrasted the situation in Arkansas with that of Georgia, and they recommended “the immigration of our people from those Counties in that State [Georgia] where

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the Post–Civil War South (Charlottesville and London, 2016), pp. 52-8. Dinnella-Borrogo argues that the convention “signaled the powerful birth of formal black politics” (p. 58).

29 Grey, indeed, was becoming a prominent black Republican leader of national renown at this point. In addition to serving on the committee on immigration, he also served on the committee on organization and the committee on rules. In less than a year he became the first black speaker to address the National Republican Convention (1872), a speech for which he received wide praise and cemented himself as a loyal Republican. Like many black Republicans, Grey opposed Carl Schurz and Horace Greeley’s Liberal Republican movement, which sought in 1872 to create a moderate platform and back away from the more “radical” aims of regular Republicans.
people utterly refuse to sell or rent lands.” The order and tone of the report made it plain: Georgia was a place to leave, and Arkansas was the place to go.\(^\text{30}\)

The Arkansas delegation succeeded in inducing at least one prominent black leader to settle in their state. Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, an Oberlin graduate, abolitionist, civil rights activist, and businessman, had recently returned to the United States after living in Victoria, British Columbia. Gibbs determined, after the Civil War, to “locate in some part of the South for the purpose of practicing law.” He felt compelled to do something to help freedpeople realize their citizenship, and he toured the South in 1871 looking for a place to settle. His brother, Jonathan C. Gibbs, was then serving as secretary of state of Florida. Gibbs visited his brother in Florida and met with the governor, both of whom tried to convince him to move to the state, but Gibbs was alarmed that his brother slept in the attic, “an arsenal…with better vantage” in the case of Ku Klux Klan activity. Gibbs continued his southern tour, serving as an Ohio delegate to the South Carolina convention.\(^\text{31}\) There he met William Grey and H. B. Robinson, who described to him “the advantages held out by the State of Arkansas.” In appealing to Gibbs, Grey and Robinson emphasized the state’s “comparative infancy of its development, [and] its golden prospects.”\(^\text{32}\) Gibbs moved to Little Rock, set up as a lawyer, and became a key player in local

\(^{30}\) Proceedings of the Southern States Convention of Colored Men, held in Columbia, South Carolina, Commencing October 18, Ending October 25, 1871 (Columbia, S.C., 1871), pp. 65-6. I can find no record of John H. Johnson serving in the official capacity of land agent for the state of Arkansas; Story Matkin-Rawn notes that, in 1880, Johnson won a surprise victory in Arkansas’s First Congressional District, which was supposed to be a Democratic stronghold; in-migration to the state changed the vote. She notes that he was born in Ohio and moved to Arkansas during Reconstruction, becoming a landowner, lawyer, teacher, and state representative, but Matkin-Rawn also makes no reference to Johnson serving as a land agent. See Matkin-Rawn, “The Great Negro State of the Country,” pp. 31-33. Johnson and Grey were both founding members of the Grand Lodge of Colored Masons in Little Rock; Grey was the first Grand Master, Johnson was the second. Pine Bluff Daily Graphic, Aug. 6, 1922.

\(^{31}\) Gibbs, Shadow and Light, an Autobiography (Lincoln, Nebr., 1995, revised edition), pp. 110-13. Gibbs’s role as “delegate” must have been unofficial. He is not listed among the convention’s delegates, and Ohio is not listed among the participating states. His brother, Jonathan C. Gibbs, was then serving as secretary of state of Florida and attended the convention as a part of Florida’s delegation.

\(^{32}\) Gibbs, Shadow and Light, p. 126; it is perhaps telling that, like the report of the convention, Gibbs considered Florida and Arkansas as two promising places to settle but ultimately found Arkansas the more appealing.
and state politics, winning election as police judge in 1873. He would eventually involve himself in efforts to induce black migration to Arkansas.

For the time being, however, Grey continued to dominate Arkansas’s pro-immigration network. In 1872, a year after returning from the South Carolina convention, Grey was appointed as the commissioner of immigration and state lands by Governor Clayton’s successor, Ozra A. Hadley.33 His reputation as a leader among immigrationists, however, preceded his appointment. In early 1873, less than a month after Grey was confirmed into his position, the Memphis *Appeal* credited him with having “turned toward the rich cotton and corn fields of Arkansas the whole tide of migratory negro population.”34 The Memphis *Avalanche* had profiled Grey a few days before. He “devotes himself assiduously to the task of gathering his fellow countrymen of all the states into the lowlands and cotton fields of Arkansas,” the *Avalanche* reported. “He it is who has begotten the hegira from Georgia.”35

33 For Grey’s appointment, see *Arkansas Gazette*, Oct. 17, 1872, and *Daily Republican*, Nov. 12, 1872. Matkin-Rawn attributes the publication of a promotional pamphlet, *Resources of the State of Arkansas, with description of Counties, Railroads, Mines and the City of Little Rock, The Commercial, Manufacturing, Political and Railroad Center of the State*, written by James P. Henry, to Grey’s tenure in office. The pamphlet was written and published in March 1871, however, a full seven months before Grey’s appointment. Beverly Watkins attributes the pamphlet’s publication to James M. Lewis, the commissioner prior to Grey. See Little Rock *Daily Republican*, March 19, 1872, for advertisement of the pamphlet’s publication. What is interesting, though, is that the pamphlet did make an effort to speak to and about black migrants to Arkansas, sending the message, in Matkin-Rawn’s words, that the state “welcomed black emigrants.” The pamphlet, and Grey’s appointment, then, reflected the lobbying he, White, and others had been doing for years to push state policy toward an explicit aim of advertising Arkansas to freedpeople in other states. Matkin-Rawn, “‘The Great Negro State of the Country,’” p. 20.


35 Memphis *Avalanche*, quoted in Chicago *Sunday Times*, Feb. 2, 1873. Grey was appointed as commissioner of immigration and state lands in October 1872, but the appointment required congressional confirmation. The general assembly’s session did not begin until January 6, 1873. The house and senate journals of that session do not list confirmations of appointed officials, so I have not established the exact date on which Grey became active as commissioner; the first unequivocal record of his confirmation I can find is an April 28, 1873, article in the Little Rock *Daily Republican* listing Grey as among state officers appointed and confirmed. A January 18, 1873, article in the *Daily Republican*, however, mentions Grey among a list of “colored men in office.” His appointment does not seem to have been contentious, and it is likely his confirmation was rather perfunctory and happened sometime in January 1873. Thus by the time the profiles in the *Avalanche* and *Appeal* were published, Grey had been in his office less than a month, hardly time to establish a reputation for turning a tide of migration toward Arkansas unless such a reputation already existed (which also helps explain why he would be among candidates considered for the office of commissioner).
As commissioner, Grey immediately involved himself in supporting legislation reforming the state’s immigration machinery. Outgoing Governor Hadley, during his address to the general assembly, called for a robust refashioning of the immigration commission. But his plans were opposed by in-coming governor Elisha Baxter, who called instead to reduce the commission’s power by combining it with the commission of public works and internal improvements (an office to which James T. White had been appointed).\footnote{For Hadley’s and Baxter’s addresses to the general assembly, see Little Rock \textit{Daily Republican}, Jan. 10, 1873; for White as commissioner of public works and internal improvements, see Little Rock \textit{Daily Republican}, April 28, 1873.} Legislators put forward three bills in line with Baxter’s request, but they failed to pass the assembly.\footnote{James White, while representing Phillips County, maneuvered to defeat these bills in the Senate. On the bill that would have combined the offices, White voted to indefinitely postpone debate and voting on the bill, a motion that succeeded. On a bill that would have redefined the duties of the commissioner of immigration in a more limited manner, White recommended the bill go to the committee on internal improvements, which he was one of five members of. The committee’s subsequent report recommended the bill not be passed. White did vote to pass a bill giving the commissioner further powers in regulating the sale of state lands. See \textit{Journal of the Senate of Arkansas Nineteenth Session} (Little Rock, Ark., 1874), pp. 563-64, 596, 702.} Hadley’s more robust immigration vision resonated in the house, where John H. Johnson was serving on the committee on immigration. A house bill called for the creation of a five-member board of immigration, composed of the governor, secretary of state, immigration commissioner, and two members of the general assembly.\footnote{Grey mentions the house bill in the Little Rock \textit{Daily Republican}, Feb. 8, 1873.}

As part of a debate in the pages of the Little Rock \textit{Daily Republican}, Grey supported the house’s bill to reform the immigration commission while appealing to the interests of cotton planters. The previous December, a group met in Little Rock and formed the Immigration Aid Society, aimed explicitly at attracting European immigrants. Led by M. A. Cohen, the society feared that the appointment of Grey meant state efforts to advertise Arkansas and encourage immigration would be directed solely at freedpeople. Cohen, under the pseudonym “Arkansas,” wrote a letter to the editor in February 1873, arguing that “it must be patent to every
unprejudiced person, that with the immigration facilities in the hands and at the disposal of our colored fellow citizens, *none but colored immigrants need be looked for*. Neither Irish, German, Swiss or any other European nationality can be induced, through the instrumentality of colored men’s influence or representations to select Arkansas for their future homes.”

Grey, styling himself “Arkansas No. 2,” hit back two days later. Grey took offense at the suggestion that his appointment as commissioner would result in particular efforts to secure black immigration; he argued against the idea of immigration as a zero-sum proposition and charged Cohen with “bring[ing] to light the old prejudice of color.” Aware that public efforts to encourage black migration needed support of both white Republicans and conservative planters, Grey played to racialized ideas of labor and settlement: “The two great inducements to immigration are cheap houses, easily obtained, and ready employment for the laborer. The first is the great inducement that will bring to us western, eastern and European immigrants—the latter attracts the colored laborer seeking employment and a fair remuneration for his labor.”

Cohen wrote back defending himself, daring anyone to point out an instance where he had “ever failed to labor as earnestly and steadfastly for the civil rights of the colored man, or where I have wavered in my adherence to the requirements of the xiii, xiv and xv amendments to the constitution of the United States.” Nevertheless, Cohen continued to argue that Grey would not bring European immigrants to Arkansas. “Such immigration,” he felt, “can only be brought

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39 Little Rock *Daily Republican*, Feb. 6, 1873, emphasis in original.
40 Little Rock *Daily Republican*, Feb. 8, 1873. Arkansas contains both lowland areas conducive to cotton agriculture and upland areas better suited for grain. As the next chapter explores, these environmental and crop-based distinctions were heavily racialized: uplands were seen as places where white families could settle on small farms and become yeoman farmers. As Grey nods to in this passage, widespread beliefs about black bodies being especially suited to hot climates and cotton agriculture normalized lowland areas as black spaces, a theme that shaped the course of postwar black migration. Those who supported black immigration to Arkansas used these ideas to their advantage, pointing out that planters needed black laborers because northern and European whites would not settle in the bottomlands. According to the racial geography of crop and climate, if Arkansas was to emerge as a leading cotton state of the New South, it needed black migrants.
hither by personal influence and exertions of men of the same color.” Grey appears to have dropped the matter at this point, but his argument found support from “S.,” whose letter to the editor suggested, “There is surely within our borders land enough for as many of both classes as will come, and in localities where their interests will not conflict.” Echoing Grey’s distinction between white homesteaders and black laborers, “S.” argued that Cohen’s vision was detrimental to the state’s interests, since “the white laborer, by repeated experiment, has been proven an utter failure [in the bottomlands]; and that the ‘great staple’ [cotton] is only capable of cultivation by the hand of the colored man.”41 As they had when confronted with the possibility of Chinese immigration, those who publicly supported black immigration to Arkansas appealed to the idea that cotton agriculture in the lowland areas required black labor. This argument was central for the effort to align the interests of black immigrationists with conservative planters.42

Grey, indeed, had never opposed efforts to attract white immigrants, and, in the legislature, he and White had supported bills aimed at advertising Arkansas to Germans.43 Aside from the obvious fact that being black legislators did not limit Grey or White to voting for only bills regarding their race, supporting such white-immigration related bills was practical. The sort of white homesteaders such bills sought to attract would be unlikely to augment the ranks of the conservative Democratic element in Arkansas; such farmers had been Unionists prior to the war. They tended to settle in the hilly regions of western Arkansas, outside the districts dominated by Democrats. Furthermore, supporting any policy designed to increase the purview and funding of the immigration commission could only be a good thing, since it would make the commission a

42 Of course, Grey, who was also the vice president of the local Union League, never intended that black immigrants should remain landless and powerless laborers. He and others walked a fine line between appealing to planters’ needs while doing everything they could to support landowning and equal rights for freedpeople. Planters were stuck between needing labor but fearing the demographic results of black immigration, a theme more fully explored in the following chapter.
43 Watkins, “Efforts to Encourage Immigration to Arkansas,” p. 47.
more integral part of state policy. Finally, Grey and White, like many black politicians during Reconstruction, were pragmatic and understood that maintaining their position in white-dominated governments required a flexible approach to building political capital.  

Ironically perhaps, given Cohen’s letters to the editor, one of the more public acts of Grey’s tenure as immigration commissioner was to attend the 1873 World Exposition in Vienna, Austria. Historian Beverly Watkins notes that Grey’s influence at the exposition was likely minimal, since Arkansas had no state exhibit. Grey’s other significant official act as commissioner was to get an article written by his clerk, John Ingram, placed in Western World, a New York periodical. The article targeted “eastern capitalists,” highlighting the development of railroads and the undeveloped mineral resources in Arkansas. In other words, two of Grey’s most public official acts as commissioner were not related to black immigration.

Nevertheless, conservatives feared the “Africanization” of Arkansas, and the politics of immigration remained fraught. Conservative commentators referred to Grey as the “great bureaucrat of Little Rock” and worried that “if his schemes be accomplished…the state [will] become the seat of a peculiar African civilization.” Arkansas, the Memphis Avalanche declared, “may become a veritable Africa.” Despite his clear willingness to support white immigration efforts, Grey appeared too radical due to both his Republican Party loyalty and his efforts to encourage black immigration. If he had more time to push his policies, Grey might have steered his office toward the black immigration efforts Cohen and the Avalanche fretted about. But Republican politics in Arkansas took a chaotic turn in spring 1874, resulting in the so-called

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44 White, in fact, had been a driving force behind a bill meant to remove voter disqualification from former Confederates. For more on such pragmatic political maneuvering, see Dinnella-Borrego, *The Risen Phoenix*, esp. pp. 8, 82-5, 179-80.
45 Watkins, “Efforts to Encourage Immigration to Arkansas,” p. 52.
Brooks-Baxter war. Grey was aligned with the administration of Brooks, and when the contest was decided in Baxter’s favor, Grey (along with many pro-Brooks officials) was brought up on impeachment charges. The factionalism within the Republican Party meant that during the November 1874 election, a Democratic majority took the assembly and the governorship. Grey’s impeachment trial was thrown out, but it hardly mattered. Sometime during the chaos of 1874 Grey was stricken with paralysis and became much less active in public life.

Grey’s legacy would live on in Mifflin Gibbs, however, who emerged by the late 1870s as a leader of Arkansas Republican Party and the paramount leader of the state’s black immigrationists. With Gibbs, the Arkansas pro-immigration network found its most consistent message and reached its widest audience. Before migrating to Arkansas, Gibbs had forged a career in politics and business on the California frontier in the 1850s, and much of his life

48 The 1872 gubernatorial election in Arkansas pitted regular Republican Elisha Baxter against Liberal Republican Joseph Brooks. The latter likely won the actual count, but Baxter’s allies controlled the ballots, and Baxter was declared the winner. Tension over the results mounted in 1873 and erupted in early 1874, when a county circuit court declared Brooks the rightful governor. Brooks and his armed supporters removed Baxter from office and barricaded the state house. Baxter took up residence down the street, and both sides began amassing a force. A few small skirmishes between the factions led to about twenty deaths and forced the federal government to intervene. Attorney General George Henry Williams decided in Baxter’s favor. In the meantime, however, Baxter had angered Republicans by refusing to issue railroad bonds and had likely alienated Grey by his desire to eliminate the office of commissioner of immigration. The factionalism between the regular and liberal wings of the Republican Party in Arkansas, along with what many saw as Baxter’s betrayal of Republican-backed development policy, led to a new state constitution in 1874 and allowed Democrats to regain control of the state that November, thus effectively ending Reconstruction in Arkansas.

49 Watkins, “Efforts to Encourage Immigration to Arkansas,” pp. 52-3; Matkin-Rawn, “‘The Great Negro State of the Country,’” pp. 19-20. The timeline of the end of Grey’s career is a bit hard to discern. Matkin-Rawn suggests Grey’s paralysis happened while he was in Vienna, in the summer of 1873, but, as Watkins notes, he was able to beat his impeachment in part by proving that he was in Washington, D.C., at the time of the Brooks-Baxter conflict, which occurred in April 1874. Watkins does not mention Grey’s illness, but given her timeline, it’s likely his health problems began sometime in mid to late 1874. By August 1875, however, Grey was serving as superintendent of public education for Little Rock and was a speaker at a “grand jubilee picnic” at the Memphis Exposition building. See Memphis Daily Appeal, Aug. 19, 1875. It is possible he had some sort of relapsing-remitting illness such as multiple sclerosis. Grey’s will, written in 1877, noted that he was in “delicate health.” He died in 1888, and his death notice noted “He has been suffering several years from paralysis and his death has been expected for months.” Fayetteville Weekly Democrat, Nov. 16, 1888. See also loose notecards in Tom W. Dillard Black Arkansiana Materials, Series I, Box 5, Folder 11. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library.
revolved around trying to, literally, find a place for African Americans. Born in Pennsylvania in 1823, Gibbs worked closely with Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists. He was part of the receiving parties for William and Ellen Craft and Henry “Box” Brown, runaway slaves who came through Philadelphia on the Underground Railroad. In 1850, Gibbs migrated to San Francisco, attracted by “the acquisition of new territory, and the developments of our hitherto undeveloped Western possessions.”

From the start, Gibbs agitated for equal rights in California. In 1851, he, along with other black leaders, founded the Alto California and published “a preamble and resolutions protesting against being disfranchised and denied the right of oath.” He vowed to “use all moral means to secure legal claim to all the rights and privileges of American citizens.” Not content to stop there, the same group, Gibbs included, soon founded the Mirror of the Times, “the first periodical issued in the State for the advocacy of equal rights for all Americans.” In 1858, when racial policies began to close in on non-whites in California, Gibbs joined a group of a few hundred black migrants to Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Though some of the migrants desired to create a segregated black community, Gibbs was not among them. Instead, he praised British Columbia because it “offered and gave protection to both [races],…equality and political privileges….and the assurance of enjoying impartially the benefits of constitutional liberty.” Gibbs became involved in regional politics, twice winning election to the Common Council of Victoria, and, in 1868, he was a delegate to the Fort Yale Convention, which

50 Tom W. Dillard, whose master’s thesis is a biography of Gibbs and who wrote the introduction to a recent edition of Gibbs’s autobiography, sums Gibbs’s life’s work up this way: “Although Gibbs was never able to find a promised land for his people, he never stopped searching.” Dillard, “Introduction,” in Gibbs, Shadow and Light, p. xviii.
51 Gibbs, Shadow and Light, pp. 11-34.
52 Gibbs, Shadow and Light, pp. 36-8.
53 Gibbs, Shadow and Light, p. 47.
54 Gibbs, Shadow and Light, p. 48.
56 Gibbs, Shadow and Light, p. 63.
considered the question of whether British Columbia should join the Dominion of Canada. While in British Columbia, Gibbs also invested in a company that developed an important anthracite coal mine; he won the contract to build the railroads and wharfs to service the mine, a venture that proved quite lucrative.\textsuperscript{57}

By the time Gibbs met William Grey in 1871, he, too, had begun piecing together a political philosophy that combined migration and the development of natural resources into something of a frontier thesis for black democracy. He viewed nature as a common resource, and though he was certainly a capitalist who valued private property, he believed that resource development should support the common good. He argued in his autobiography that “God seems to have given this beautiful earth, with its lands, to be utilized and a source of blessing, not to be locked by the promptings of avarice nor the clog of incapacity; that it should be occupied by those who…can make it the most efficient in development.”\textsuperscript{58} Gibbs believed that a constitutional republic should ensure that anyone, regardless of color, could contribute to the wealth of the nation by developing its resources. For Gibbs, as for Grey, migration was the mechanism through which black labor could flow to underdeveloped frontiers; by adding to the wealth of the nation, black migrants could turn frontiers into productive regions and themselves into productive citizens. Toward this end, Gibbs worked time and again to support racially integrated and development-oriented societies in his efforts to gain geographical and social space for black people. Having worked to advance such policies in California and British Columbia, Gibbs turned his attention to Arkansas.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{57} Gibbs, \textit{Shadow and Light}, pp. 101-06.

\textsuperscript{58} Gibbs, \textit{Shadow and Light}, p. 96. Though situated in his autobiography as a rumination on the changeability of government over territory, specifically in discussing the administration of Vancouver Island, it’s likely Gibbs had the context of land use in the U.S. South in mind when he wrote these lines, since by this point he’d be immersed in the politics of black landownership in the South for thirty years.

\textsuperscript{59} It is worth pointing out that Gibbs was opposed to foreign colonization, arguing against ideas of separatism and arguing strongly that the best place for black people is “the land of their birth,” the United States. This is important
Gibbs set himself up as a lawyer in Little Rock, passing the bar in 1872 and going into practice with Lloyd Wheeler, a prominent black lawyer active in the Pulaski County Republican Committee. The next year, Gibbs accepted the Republican nomination as police judge for Little Rock. He held the position from November 1874 to April 1875. During his early years in Arkansas, Gibbs continued to travel widely to attend black political conventions. He was an Arkansas delegate to the 1872 National Convention of Colored Men in New Orleans and a delegate to the Newspaper Convention of Colored Men in Cincinnati in 1875, and he served as president of the National Convention of Colored Men in Nashville in 1876. That same year, Gibbs won election as a presidential elector at large for Arkansas, and he became a proponent of Rutherford B. Hayes. For his support of Hayes during the disputed 1876 election, Gibbs was appointed registrar of the federal land office at Little Rock in 1877, a position that gave him a central role in recruiting and settling black migrants in Arkansas.

Gibbs held his position with the land office for twelve years, and he took his duties seriously. The federal land office examiner, C. W. Holcomb, in fact found that “no office in the

for understanding Gibbs’s stance toward black migration and situates him in line with Douglass and against H. M. Turner (though Gibbs did support the Kansas Exodus).

60 For a general narrative of Gibbs’s political career in Arkansas, with particular emphasis on his role in the state’s Republican Party, see Tom W. Dillard, “‘Golden Prospects and Fraternal Amenities’: Mifflin W. Gibbs’s Arkansas Years,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 35.4 (Winter 1976), pp. 307-333.


62 Interestingly, Gibbs was appointed to the land office the same year, 1877, that Kenneth Barnes identifies as the start of a Liberian emigration movement in Arkansas. These two streams of migration, one to Arkansas from elsewhere in the South, and one from Arkansas to Liberia, do not seem to have interacted much. None of the actors I’ve identified as the forces behind the state’s black immigration network appear in Barnes’s work as active in Liberian emigration. Barnes notes in a footnote that James T. White vowed he would “leave the country before he would allow high-handed outlaws to take away his rights,” and placed his Helena, Arkansas, residence on the market in 1882. A profile of White from 1887, however, reported that he had lately been engaged in the Benevolent and Church Aid Society and editing a political, religious, and education journal, the *Arkansas Review*. The profile states that White’s “standing among the people of the State is good,” suggesting that he had not, in fact, left the country. Simmons, *Men of Mark*, pp. 590-93. See also Kenneth C. Barnes, *Journey of Hope: The Back-to-Africa Movement in Arkansas in the Late 1800s* (Chapel Hill, 2004), p. 204n6.
country was in better clerical condition” than the Little Rock office under Gibbs. But while keeping neat books won Gibbs praise from his supervisors, his real focus was finding land for black migrants. The registrar position lent Gibbs a platform to refine his philosophy of black political power, which eventually came to reflect a program of migration, landownership, industrial education and commercial development, and Republican Party politics. Gibbs held that “the political lever needs for its fulcrum a foundation as solidly material as equitably sentimental.” And the land and resources of Arkansas, he thought, could provide former slaves just that foundation. “The State was blessed with a valuable patrimony,” according to Gibbs, namely “an extensive area of agricultural” land.

During his tenure as registrar, Gibbs continued to attend state and national conventions, where he occasionally pushed resolutions favoring immigration to and landownership in Arkansas. In the Arkansas state colored men’s convention in 1883, for instance, Gibbs recommended the adoption of a resolution promoting black migration to Arkansas. The resolution drew a contrast between Arkansas and the older slave states in the east, pointing to the difficulty former slaves faced in obtaining land in those states and highlighting the easy availability of landownership in Arkansas. The resolution also suggested the climate of Arkansas was “more conducive to health” than the eastern climate, and the resolution was avowedly political, linking migration to Arkansas with landownership and political rights. The resolution argued that “for a people to become independent and respected, they must be owners of the soil,”

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64 Gibbs, Shadow and Light, p. 165.
65 Gibbs, Shadow and Light, p. 185.
66 Gibbs joined the Arkansas Immigration Society in November 1879, the same year he and James T. Rapier surveyed Kansas for Senator William Windom. Gibbs endorsed the Kansas Exodus even as he continued to promote Arkansas as a destination for black migrants. Arkansas Gazette, Nov. 26, 1879.
and it called for the convention to “issue an address to the colored people of the south, setting forth every advantage pertaining to this state and encourage immigration from the various states of the south.”\textsuperscript{67} At the same convention, Gibbs was elected as the delegate to the national convention, and, in his acceptance speech, Gibbs argued that landownership was the basis of black political power.

The following year, Blanche K. Bruce approached Gibbs about organizing an Arkansas exhibit for the World’s Industrial and Cotton Exposition in New Orleans. Gibbs accepted, believing the fair was “a great opportunity…to show our progress in industry and culture, on the fields of nature.”\textsuperscript{68} Gibbs thus organized the Arkansas exhibit for the “Department of Colored Exhibits,” and Arkansas won notice for agricultural and mechanical achievements.\textsuperscript{69} Gibbs also took the opportunity, while attending the New Orleans Expo, to organize a convention on industrial education. He went on to serve as president of the convention.\textsuperscript{70}

Indeed, though Gibbs’s position in the land office made him an obvious supporter of black landownership, he also encouraged industrial education, seeing both as routes to political power when combined with migration to Arkansas, because the state, still relatively underdeveloped in the 1880s, offered an opportunity for African Americans to be at the leading

\textsuperscript{67} Arkansas \textit{Weekly Mansion}, Sept. 1, 1883.
\textsuperscript{68} Gibbs, \textit{Shadow and Light}, pp. 196-98. Bruce hoped the Colored Department at the Exposition would “once and forever answer the assertion so often made that our race was not advancing in the material things of life…showing to the world what they have been able to do in less than twenty years of freedom.” New Orleans \textit{Times-Democrat}, Nov. 20, 1884. Miki Pfeffer argues that, in contrast to Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise eleven years later, black leaders used the 1884 New Orleans Exposition to espouse “a more equitable future.” Pfeffer, “‘Mr. Chairman and FELLOW AMERICAN CITIZENS’: African American Agency at the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial in New Orleans, 1884–1885,” \textit{Louisiana History} 51.4 (Fall 2010), p. 443.
\textsuperscript{69} Arkansas’s section of the Department of Colored Exhibits won best collective display of apples and twenty individual awards for agricultural varieties. Additionally, Arkansas’s black farmers and producers took home more than a hundred diplomas for crops, mineral specimens, and manufactured articles. Izola Preston, \textit{James Henry Smith, 1843–1914: Private Secretary, Activist, Dentist, Painter, Inventor, Former School Teacher} (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), p. 3. Tom W. Dillard Black Arkansiana Materials, Series I, Box 13, Folder 42. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library.
\textsuperscript{70} William J. Simmons, \textit{Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising} (Cleveland, Ohio, 1887), p. 410.
edge of capitalist expansion in the U.S. South.\textsuperscript{71} Gibbs continued to support industrial fairs after the New Orleans Expo. In 1886 he delivered the welcome address for the Pine Bluff, Arkansas, Colored Industrial Fair. Proponents of the fair hoped it would “induce immigration” by displaying the material achievements of black Arkansans.\textsuperscript{72} Gibbs declared that the fair “argues well for the future of the colored people,” and he noted “that nations were influential in the ratio of their agricultural and mechanical development, and that the array of production here made proclaimed in hopeful tones that ‘we are coming.’”\textsuperscript{73}

The fair did just what Gibbs hoped it would and advertised the benefits of Arkansas’s environment beyond its borders, helping symbolically make the argument Gibbs had spent a decade promoting: that the abundant resources and fertile soil of Arkansas provided a material foundation on which to build black political power.\textsuperscript{74} J. T. Jenifer, a Methodist minister who had spent some time in Arkansas in the mid-1870s but was then living in Boston, agreed in spirit with Gibbs’s speech. Jenifer had been involved in the 1871 pro-immigration meeting in Little Rock, and 1886 he praised the Colored Industrial Fair’s “purpose to exhibit the arts of industry and material development of the colored people of Arkansas.” Jenifer, too, saw a close connection between the social development of black Arkansans and the state’s environment. “And in what state are there finer facilities to be found for such a movement than in Arkansas, the state of rivers, lakes, and varied soils and productions,” he asked. “And what may we not hope from a people of pluck and skillful energy, who are citizens of a state so wealthy in natural resources as Arkansas.” The work that Gibbs had done to advertise the state and help black

\textsuperscript{71} Tellingly, Booker T. Washington wrote the introduction to Gibbs’s autobiography. See chapter 5 for further discussion of Booker T. Washington and intra-South migration.

\textsuperscript{72} Arkansas \textit{Gazette}, Oct. 20, 1886.

\textsuperscript{73} Gibbs, \textit{Shadow and Light}, pp. 206-07.

\textsuperscript{74} By its second day the fair had drawn a crowd of 1,500, “mostly from abroad.” The \textit{Gazette} predicted 6,000 by Saturday and noted that these numbers did not account for locals, who had “not yet turned out.” Arkansas \textit{Gazette}, Oct. 22 and 23, 1886.
migrants acquire land was paying off: the 1886 fair, concluded Jenifer, would “do more to vindicate the rights of the negro to equal chance in the body politic and to win for him confidence and respect than any other line of effort.”

Gibbs’s work to promote the development of Arkansas and to encourage black migration to aid that development continued into the late 1880s. In 1887 he attended a “Convention on the Improvement of the Western Water-Ways,” which sent a memorial to Congress suggesting ways to improve the infrastructure of trans-Mississippian rivers for the aid of commerce. The next year, his final with the land office, Gibbs attended a State Immigration Convention, which aimed, in part, to highlight the benefits of Arkansas to black migrants. Reflecting on his tenure in the land office, Gibbs wrote in his autobiography that his work was “a source of pleasure” to him because it provided “glimpses of unselfish ambition and benefit [he] conferred.”

A biographical sketch about Gibbs, carried in the Indianapolis Freeman in 1889, said this of his time as registrar: “In his zeal to be doing something to benefit his race, he utilized opportunities of his official position to carry on an extensive correspondence with colored men in the South, and also in many of the Northern and Western States. The result of which has been to induce upwards of 1,000 colored men to locate who now have homes of their own ranging from 40 to

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75 Arkansas Gazette, Sept. 26, 1886. In the 1870s, Jenifer was minister of the A.M.E church in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and he spent most of that decade active in politics and church building in Arkansas. He was also involved in efforts to induce black migration to the state. Jenifer attended the “colored citizens” meeting in support of black migration to Arkansas in March 1871 and was nominated as the commissioner of state lands and immigration at the state Republican convention in 1876, but he did not win the position. Jenifer was in Boston from 1881 to 1883 and had again returned to Boston by 1885. He may have used his position in Boston to continue supporting migration to Arkansas, though no direct evidence other than his remarks about the state fair suggests he did so. Jenifer was soon back in Arkansas, perhaps specifically to support the fair. He delivered the opening prayer for the fair on October 19, 1873. Arkansas Gazette, Oct. 20, 1886. See also Arkansas Gazette, Aug. 11, 1876, and Arkansas Weekly Mansion, July 7, 1883.

76 Convention on the Improvement of Western Water-Ways, together with a Brief Memorial to Congress, Memphis, Tenn., October 20 & 21, 1887.

77 Arkansas Democrat, Feb. 1, 1888.

78 Gibbs, Shadow and Light, p. 222.
160 acres.”^79 Gibbs himself claimed that “by personal convass [sic] and unofficial publication I contributed in inducing thousands of immigrants and others to homestead the virgin soil of Arkansas.”^80 Given the way networks of written correspondence rippled out and multiplied as they crossed into the oral networks of kinship and labor recruitment networks, Gibbs’s letter writing could have reached substantially more freedpeople than he realized.

Gibbs’s two tenures as registrar were likely the high point of his career. In the late 1890s, after seeking to becoming the U.S. consul to Haiti, Gibbs was appointed as the consul to Tamatave, Madagascar, a forlorn diplomatic outpost that he despised. Gibbs abandoned his post before his consulship expired, citing health reasons and returning to Little Rock in 1901. Not long after returning to Arkansas, Gibbs faced another disappointment. In 1903 he founded the Capital City Savings Bank to serve the city’s black community. But within five years, rather than providing a philanthropic capstone to his career, the bank defaulted, and a grand jury indicted Gibbs for knowingly accepting deposits to an insolvent bank. Gibbs’s career ended with legal and financial embarrassment, as he settled out of court for the $28,000 in claims against him. Gibbs’s health declined in the following years, and he died in 1915.^81

Grey and Gibbs have been relatively forgotten, but they played substantial roles in shaping postwar black politics. Not only were both men active in national Republican politics during the 1870s and 1880s, but they also shaped the course of black migration in the South. Indeed, they made intra-South migration a central component of their political philosophies,

^79 Indianapolis Freeman, May 11, 1889. I hope to eventually find this correspondence but so far have not. In fact, for a person so active and well connected, Gibbs seems to have left little trace in the archives. He left no diary or personal paper collections anywhere. And though we know from his autobiography that he and Bruce K. Blanche were friends and corresponded, for instance, Blanche’s papers at Howard University contain no correspondence between him and Gibbs.

^80 Gibbs, Shadow and Light, p. 222.

staking their careers on the idea that movement, geography, and environment were as important to racial uplift as education, civil rights, and electoral politics. And as the leaders of Arkansas’s black immigration network, they crafted a cohesive geographical framework for postwar black migration. At root, this framework held that the environment of Arkansas was superior to that of the older eastern slave states, and that the state’s fertile soil provided a firm material basis on which freedpeople could establish a meaningful political presence. In making this appeal, Grey, Gibbs, and others pulled on and repeated agrarian critiques of the land use legacy of slavery, and they produced a set of beliefs that suggested areas with fertile land were more conducive to freedom than places with worn out soil. By referencing antebellum ideas about the ecological costs of slavery, pro-immigrationists, and migrants themselves, created a comparative geography of imagined landscapes—from their seat in Arkansas, Grey and Gibbs pictured and portrayed Georgia as an eroded landscape incapable of supporting healthy societies. In turn, the ideas of Arkansas they helped perpetuate allowed freedpeople in southeastern states to imagine Arkansas (and the southwest more generally) as a pristine environment full of fertile soil, abundant game, and endless resources. This discourse on Arkansas helped freedpeople in older states assess their present conditions and envision their future, inherently political acts. For those who acted on such ideas, migration appeared as the best route to altering their world.

The idea of worn out soil resonated with freedpeople because of their experience with agriculture and the dynamics of the slave trade and because it had been a central part of antislavery ideology in the 1850s. In its general outlines this antislavery position, based in agrarian ideals of land use and society, took northern agricultural practice as the benchmark of a virtuous farming society, and found, in comparison, that the southern slave-based system was wasteful and degrading. The northern system focused on the careful management of small farms over the course
of multiple generations—a system that stressed soil health over the long term. The southern slave system, in contrast, placed less emphasis on soil health and continuous cultivation. The dynamics of the cotton economy, combined with the territorial expansion of the United States into the Old Southwest, meant that it was often cheaper for planters to move westward than it was to invest in improving older land. In their constant push toward the frontier, planters left behind them worn out soils and clear-cut, eroded landscapes. Hinton Rowan Helper, whose 1857 antislavery polemic *The Impending Crisis* provided a standard formulation of this critique, argued that the ecology of slavery produced “sick” and “dead” soil. Because of “the unnatural tread of the slave,” Helper wrote, “that which was once a beautiful fertile and luxuriant woodland, is soon despoiled of all its treasures, and converted into an eye offending desert.”

This thread of antislavery thought gained momentum throughout the 1850s, and evidence suggests that enslaved people, not just white opponents of slavery, developed a critique of slavery based on the way it produced degraded landscapes and societies. Slave-based agriculture ensured that enslaved laborers were intimately familiar with the soil and landscapes in which they toiled. Their experiential knowledge of ecology meant that they often had as much or more of a sense of the land’s fertility as planters. In many places, it was the enslaved laborers who knew how to terrace, plow, and fertilize land, and it was also enslaved people who did the back-

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breaking labor of clearing new lands as soils wore out.\textsuperscript{84} Indeed, the dynamics of the internal slave trade alerted enslaved people to the ecological costs of slavery: at root it was planters’ calculations of declining fertility and profit that tore enslaved families apart and drove the institution of slavery westward, into the uncleared lands of the Old Southwest. As soil health declined in southeastern states, enslaved people became the basis of planter wealth—moveable assets kept profitable as long as new lands could be turned into cotton fields. Charles Ball, for instance, wrote that planters “valued their lands less than their slaves,” and he noted that “Under the bad culture which is practised \textit{sic} in the south, the land is constantly becoming poorer.”\textsuperscript{85}

Thus, as literary scholar Cristin Ellis argues, enslaved people understood that “an environmental crisis of soil exhaustion…was in fact causing planters to become increasingly less economically dependent on the agricultural products of slave labor than on the value of those slaves themselves.” Ellis contends that such an ecological critique of slavery became central to Frederick Douglass’s antislavery thought in the mid-1850s, at about the same time that Helper wrote \textit{The Impending Crisis}.\textsuperscript{86}

The Civil War of course put an end to this system of slave-based land use, but the idea that slavery had ruined the land of the South remained active, particularly among former slaves. Several who toured the South after the Civil War referenced the land use critique of slavery

\textsuperscript{84} As Walter Johnson writes about the agricultural and environmental knowledge of enslaved people, “Each of the countless actions sacrificed to the annual crop represented a way of knowing and of working the earth.” He calls this “practical knowledge,” and contrasts it with planters’ so-called “mastery” over their laborers and lands. Johnson, \textit{River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom} (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), pp. 162-66.

\textsuperscript{85} Charles Ball, \textit{Slavery in the United States. A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave Under Various Masters, and was One Year in the Navy with Commodore Barney, During the Late War} (New York, 1837), pp. 47, 15. See also Smith, \textit{African American Environmental Thought}, pp. 52-5.

\textsuperscript{86} Helper published his work in 1857. Ellis argues that Douglass’s 1855 edition of \textit{My Bondage and My Freedom} introduced this thread of his antislavery theory. Adam Wesley Dean points to this same period, arguing that the agrarian critique of slavery was a primary component of the nascent Republican Party. Cristin Ellis, “Amoral Abolitionism: Frederick Douglass and the Environmental Case Against Slavery,” \textit{American Literature} 86.2 (June 2014), pp. 275-303.
when they observed what they perceived as a ruined landscape in the older slave states. James Lindsay Smith, who had escaped Virginian enslavement in the 1830s, returned to the site of his former plantation in 1867. He found a crumbling society and barren lands. “The fertile soil which once brought forth an abundance, and the cotton and the corn, presented an unbroken scene of barrenness and desolation,” he wrote. “The place was almost depopulated.” He returned again twelve years later, and “found the old place much dilapidated. The fields from which were raised corn and wheat were all grown over with thick forests.” “Desolation,” Smith recalled, “seemed to mark the place,” and he was not alone in drawing such conclusions.87 Henry Clay Bruce, who had also fled from Virginian enslavement, likewise found ruins when he toured the South in 1893. He came to understand that slavery had “cursed the land.” “[T]housands of acres [had] gone wild, too poor to produce anything on…, and the colored people could not make a living on them and of course, left the country in search of work.”88 The agrarian critique of slavery produced the geographical frameworks that supported postwar migration.

To this point, Smith and Bruce not only both perceived that these Virginian landscapes were scarred by slavery, but they also both noted a relative dearth of black populations. Despite, as Bruce reported, land being available for three dollars an acre, former slaves had opted to leave rather than cultivate land “cursed” by slavery. By migrating away from older states like Virginia, former slaves extended the land-use critique of slavery into the postwar period and constructed an understanding of the worn-out soil of older slave states as a hindrance to black freedom and citizenship. Their migrations were based on a reading of their current landscape and an

88 Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man: Twenty-Nine Years a Slave, Twenty-Nine Years a Free Man* (York, Pa., 1895), pp. 49-50.
experience-based knowledge of the relationship of environmental conditions and social
conditions. Enslaved and freed people had intimate relationships with land and environments and
had experienced the privations inherent in less productive soils—in places with less game, black
people were more reliant on white shopkeepers and their masters. In a place like Arkansas, the
abundance of game meant an increase in autonomy. It also led to surpluses that could be traded
or gifted, thus reinforcing and indeed creating community bonds and free institutions. More
productive soil meant more product for less input, which again reflected an increase in
autonomy, whether working as sharecropper, renter, or owner-operator. Enslaved people’s lived
experience and hands-on knowledge of environment therefore made the links between natural
resources and “freedom” not abstract ideals but tangible nexuses of material conditions and
political potential. Knowing how worn out soil had affected their lives in the eastern and upper
South, freedpeople intuitively understood how the touted abundance of the Arkansas and
Mississippi River alluvial region could shape the conditions of freedom.\textsuperscript{89} Enslaved and freed
people’s environmental ethos thus had much in common with the agrarian ideology elite leaders
such as Gibbs and Grey used to craft their messages.

Comparing the narratives of freedpeople who migrated to Arkansas with the statements
and ideas of Arkansas’s black immigration network reveals widespread agreement between elite
information channels and vernacular understandings of the environmental basis for postwar
black migration within the South. Arkansas’s pro-immigrationists rarely advertised their state
without critiquing the environment of other states. James T. White’s resolution at the Colored
Baptist Convention, for instance, suggested a program of encouraging “immigration to the new

\textsuperscript{89} Stewart, “Plantations, Agroecology, Environmental Thought, and the American South,” pp. 40-5 has a good
discussion of enslaved people’s “environmental ethos.” Stewart argues that emancipation-era political activity
among freedpeople reflected “a political behavior with deep roots in the conditions of American slavery and in the
relationship of African Americans to the land” (p. 45).
states, where land is cheap and plentiful, from those where it is monopolized and worn out.”

Grey worked the message at both ends of the migration, capitalizing on the idea not only of Georgia as worn out land, but also of Arkansas as uniquely suited for freedpeople. The Memphis Avalanche article that raised concern that Grey would “Africanize” Arkansas, explained how he advertised the state to freedpeople: “He insists that the lowlands and cotton and sugar plantations of the valley of the Mississippi constitute the negro’s paradise; that their labor finds its greatest reward; that their particular physical and mental organization, especially adapts them to the climactic laws of this great valley.”

A separate profile of Grey, moreover, credited him with “thoroughly comprehend[ing]…the relative attractiveness of states,” a geographical knowledge he used in his immigrationist platform. Gibbs supported similar language ten years later at the Arkansas Colored State Convention, reading a resolution that posited Arkansas’s “salubrious climate and pure water are more conducive to health than the [overpopulated] districts.”

In pointing out the differences of climate, land fertility, and productivity in older states like Georgia compared with newer states like Arkansas, Grey and Gibbs were making a larger argument about the ways environment and society were linked. Such ideas had been at the core of the ecological critique of slavery, which held that slavery was a wasteful system of land management and created immoral, dilapidated societies. The reverse of that proposition was that good land naturally created good communities. This assumption often went unspoken in its explicit formulation because it was ingrained in the political culture of agrarian republicanism that revolved around the idea that land was the basis of national wealth. But when evidence

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90 Little Rock Daily Republican, July 25, 1871.
92 Memphis Appeal quoted in Little Rock Daily Republican, Feb. 5, 1873. While white commentators certainly pushed the link between race and climate in terms of labor, black leaders supporting migratory movements likewise used such ideas pragmatically in the postwar period, a subject explored more fully in the following chapter.
93 Arkansas Weekly Mansion, Sept. 1, 1883.
94 Smith, African American Environmental Thought, pp. 43-51.
challenged the belief that environment and society were linked, commentators noticed. An A.M.E. bishop touring the southwest in the mid-1870s, for instance, was shocked to find an area with fertile land but poor community institutions. He was particularly dismayed at the state of church buildings in communities west of Houston and wrote that “There is no need of such a state of things for they till the most fertile land on the continent. They make splendid crops nearly every year. There must be a change. We must and will have better places of worship.”95 Had he deemed the land less fertile, he may not have blinked when he encountered run-down buildings.

Advertising the environment of Arkansas, then, was a way to make implicit statements about the differing prospects of free black communities in areas with older, less fertile land. Rather than highlight problems of civil and political rights in places like Georgia while emphasizing the number of black officeholders in Arkansas, Grey and Gibbs, among others, let material differences in land make the argument for them. This idea was summed up well by J. T. Jenifer’s suggestion that there was “hope” for black “citizens of a state so wealthy in natural resources as Arkansas.”96 An experience-based environmental geography and agrarian ideology were at the root of black migration, and ideas of natural abundance factored heavily into freedpeople’s decisions to migrate.97

Arkansas yielded four volumes of narratives for the Works Progress Administration’s Ex-Slave Narratives in the 1930s, and because of the amount of immigration to the state in the late

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95 Christian Recorder, Sept. 19, 1878.
96 Arkansas Gazette, Sept. 26, 1886
97 This is in contrast to the many works on black migration that focus exclusively on push factors to migration and thus emphasize violence and political and economic oppression in motivating migrations. I am instead arguing that we need to pay more attention to the ways material conditions and geography shaped migration. I am also suggesting that focusing on migration complicates the image of postwar black politics put forward by neorevisionists such as Steven Hahn, Tera Hunter, Susan O’Donovan, Justin Behrend, Dylan C. Penningroth and others, who focus on local networks and the building of free institutions. The extent of intra-South migration shows that communities and networks were in a constant state of flux and that, for many freedpeople, political power came from movement, not local stability.
nineteenth century, many of the former slaves who were interviewed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were not native Arkansans. And often, when interviewed, they reflected on their motivations to migrate to Arkansas. Similar ideas recur in many of these interviews: the “new” and fertile soil, the timber wealth, the abundance of fish and game, and the ability to easily graze livestock appear repeatedly throughout the WPA Arkansas narratives as inducements to migration. The similarity among and frequency of such discussions is striking. Though there are of course outliers, many former slaves who migrated to Arkansas credited their move to the undeveloped and “wild” nature of the state. And in so doing, they also critiqued other, longer-settled states of the South. Because years of slave-based extractive agriculture had depleted the soil and cleared the forests in these places, they believed, these states held less opportunity for black freedom and citizenship. Migrating from the “old country” to the “new” soil of Arkansas was thus as much a temporal as a spatial move: hope for the future lay in Arkansas.

Martha Ann Dixon, born a slave in North Carolina, hinted at just such a connection between place, movement, and ideas of freedom. For her, the postwar period was one of “hunting a better place and more freedom.” Initially, following emancipation, she stayed with her grandmother and former owner and endured hard times. “Money scarce and prices high,” she recalled. “Pigs was hard to start, mules and horses was mighty scarce. Seed was scarce. Everything had to be started from the stump.” After she married in the 1880s, however, Dixon left her old home. “We come on the passenger train and paid our own way to Arkansas.” There, she found her “better place and more freedom.” Something about Arkansas made postemancipation life more meaningful to Dixon and her husband; Arkansas’s abundance compared favorably to the
relatively postwar privation Dixon experienced in the east. “We have done better out here than we could have in North Carolina,” she told her interviewer in the 1930s.98

Few former slaves made the connection to “freedom” explicit, but many, like Dixon, found that their migration to Arkansas helped them understand a comparative geography in the environment and land use of the South. “The land was so poor in Tennessee and this was uncleared land so we come here to a new country” recalled Callie Donalson. To her, it was important that the land in Arkansas was fertile because it meant, whether one owned a farm or sharecropped, the required inputs to produce a crop were lower in Arkansas than elsewhere. “They use guano back in Tennessee,” Donalson said, which she contrasted with the “rich land” she had farmed in Arkansas.99 Wade Dudley likewise migrated to Arkansas because of the soil, remarking simply that “The land was better here than in Mississippi.”100

D. Davis, too, based his decision to migrate around considerations of soil and yield. Davis left his home in Starkville, Mississippi, because it was “ole country” where the “land was pow[er]ful thin.” He visited his son in Arkansas, and when he had “seen how much cotton [people grew]…and how rich the land, [he] just went crazy over this country.” He soon moved the rest of his family to Marvell, Arkansas, where he worked on shares for two years before buying his own place.101 Like Donalson, Davis decided that farming the fertile soil of Arkansas held more promise than the thinner and longer-worked land in eastern Mississippi. According to historian Story Matkin-Rawn, sharecroppers and farm laborers earned higher profits in Arkansas, compared with South Carolina and Virginia, because the state’s rich alluvial soil did not require

100 TAS Vol. 8 pt. 2 p. 213. See also interview with Emmett Bael, who stated “Mama come out here in 1880. I figured there better land out here and followed here in 1881. We paid our own ways.” The Baels came from Tennessee, TAS Vol. 8, pt. 1, p. 127.
fertilizer. Word of higher wages and better land circulated through geopolitical networks in the older slave states, helping shape freedpeople’s geographic knowledge: reports about fertile land, high yields of cotton, and high wages made Arkansas attractive to many migrants.

While some migrants, like Davis, Donalson, and Dixon, drew a direct contrast between their former home and Arkansas, even many who did not critique their former homes still employed comparative language when recalling the attractions of Arkansas. Enoch Bael moved to Arkansas because “Everybody said the land was so much better in Arkansas.” Henry Doyl moved to Arkansas in 1887 and worked odd jobs, mostly repairing levees and digging ditches, and though he was not a farmer, he migrated because he “heard that Arkansas was a rich country.” Such a phrasing suggests that Doyl thought the fertile soil in Arkansas would enable him to have a better life, even if he did not interact with the land directly. Will Burks Sr., who moved to Arkansas from Columbia, Tennessee, was a bit more ambivalent when he recalled that “It was jes different in a new country.” But it was a difference he embraced. Like Burks, Doyl, and Bael, many freedpeople heard that Arkansas possessed fertile and productive land, and when they contrasted that with the environment in their current surroundings, they decided that the undeveloped land of the trans-Mississippi West held more promise for postemancipation life.

For many of these migrants, timber especially made Arkansas attractive because the old growth forests found in many areas could provide ready capital for newcomers, and Arkansas’s promoters drew attention to timber. A lengthy article in the Christian Recorder, for instance, referred to Georgia as “worn out land at a high price” with “wood high and not plentiful,” and it

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102 Matkin-Rawn, “‘The Great Negro State of the Country,’” p. 10. According to Matkin-Rawn, the average monthly wage for laborers in the South was $16, while in Arkansas it was $21-$23/month. That same year, daily wages in South Carolina were 50 cents/day and Virginia planters paid 55 cents/day, while in Arkansas, laborers could earn $1.02/day.

103 TAS Vol. 8, pt. 1, p. 136.

104 TAS Vol. 8, pt. 2, p. 207.

105 TAS Vol. 8, pt. 1, p. 338.
put this in relation to Arkansas, where “a large portion of it [the state] consists of wild land” that was cheap and uncleared.\textsuperscript{106} And unlike in other parts of the South where second-growth pine forests had reclaimed old fields, Arkansas’s forests consisted of hardwoods sought by commercial markets in Memphis and New Orleans.\textsuperscript{107} Getting set up on land in Arkansas often entailed the arduous work of clearing land, but that work could also be quite profitable. Even those who rented found timber useful—it supplied them with cheap firewood for cooking and heating or to sell to neighbors or passing steamboats on the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers. Andrew Gregory made his way to Arkansas in 1882, separating with his folks who sharecropped in Tennessee because he heard “the land was new” in Arkansas. He set up near Brinkley and “farmed and cleared land all [his] life” and made a living by hauling and selling wood.\textsuperscript{108}

Lee Guidon, who was born enslaved in South Carolina, also took advantage of the Arkansas forests after he moved there in the 1880s. He developed a cyclical working rhythm to balance farming and wood cutting: On the hot days, he traded field work for wood cutting, and on the days he farmed, he “put each boy on a load of wood an’ we sell wood. Then we clear land till next spring.” The nearby town provided a ready market for fuel and building materials that supplemented the family’s income when fields were fallow. “I cut and hauled wood all winter,” Guidon recalled, and eventually he “had three teams haulin’ wood to Clarendon.” When he was interviewed in the 1930s, he reflected on the changed ecological and economic situation. “The present times is hard,” he told Irene Robertson. “Timber is scarce.”\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{106} Christian Recorder, May 6, 1875.
\textsuperscript{107} Scott Bond, a highly successful black farmer in Reconstruction-era Arkansas, reported for instance that the hardwoods on 320 acres of Arkansas alluvial bottoms could bring as much as $2,785. Dan A. Rudd and Theo. Bond, From Slavery to Wealth: The Life of Scott Bond. The Rewards of Honesty, Industry, Economy, and Perseverance (Madison, Ark., 1917), p. 130.
\textsuperscript{108} TAS Vol. 9, pt. 3, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{109} TAS Vol. 9, pt. 3, pp. 125-26
Talk of land and timber were often connected to ideas of owning property—many of the former slaves interviewed by the WPA explained that while they initially sharecropped in Arkansas, they went on to rent or own land in later years.\(^{110}\) The abundance of cheap and available acreage in Arkansas mattered to these migrants because it represented the possibility of obtaining private property and participating in market relations. But the state’s common resources also proved a pull for migrants because they offered routes to autonomy. Enslaved people had often relied upon environmental resources for food, medicine, and trade goods in the informal economy of slavery; migration to Arkansas reveals that such methods of procuring sustenance and resources remained important to freedpeople.\(^{111}\) In particular, former slaves recalled the importance of fish, game, and unfenced grazing land, and this, too, they contrasted with other parts of the South. As with finding autonomy in landownership, the state’s commons provided a level of economic and social security.\(^{112}\)

Prior to emancipation, hunting and fishing fell into the set of “common rights” enslaved people expected slaveholders to recognize. As with other aspects of the slave system, such as provision grounds and Sundays off from labor, hunting and fishing began as privileges granted to

\(^{110}\) E. H. Abington, whose father was a planter in the delta region of eastern Arkansas in the 1870s and 1880s, recalled his father had to make an annual trip to Mississippi and Tennessee in search of laborers because his hands often earned enough in a season of cropping to rent or buy land for the following year. Abington, *Back Roads and Bicarbonate: The Autobiography of an Arkansas County Doctor* (New York, 1955).


\(^{112}\) Indeed, planters worried that abundant natural resources attenuated their control over emancipated laborers. Observing interest in migration to the fertile regions along the Mississippi, one commentator wrote that “Wherever land is rich, or on any other account the means of subsistence are easily procured, negro labor is comparatively unreliable and valueless. The hands will abandon the crops in any condition for a frolic. The fish and game of the coasts, river bottoms and hammocks supply food as the reward of mere sport, and the uses of labor are summed up in the need of money for ammunition, fishing tackle, holiday and Sunday finery, tobacco, whiskey, and other dietic luxuries which the negro affects.” For this writer and others who took a macro view of black migration, the problem wasn’t confined to the states people left, for while those states would face the problem of labor shortages, the states where people moved to would face the problem of uncontrollable labor due to environmental abundance. Macon *Weekly Telegraph*, April 25, 1871.
enslaved people, but over time they evolved into the set of negotiated rights built into the de facto contract of enslavement. By providing supplemental food sources and items for trade, game and fish became central parts of the informal economy of slavery and helped cement enslaved communities. After emancipation, freedpeople continued to rely on access to hunting and fishing but often faced hostility from white landowners. A group of freedpeople living on Roanoke Island, North Carolina, wrote to the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1866 that, the land having been restored to its former owner, they were being pushed out of their homes and feared losing access to the fish and game of the area. They petitioned the Bureau, arguing that “born and reared here [we] know only how to make a living by fishing, fowling, and ‘progging’…. [we] are not farmers.” Planters, eager to establish a profitable system of postemancipation labor, complained about freedpeople’s ability to gather food from the wild and sought to limit their ability to do so. Francis Butler Leigh, the daughter of a prominent Georgia planter who took over plantation management after emancipation, faced perpetual labor problems on her Sea Island plantations. Leigh’s laborers kept leaving her plantations for the piney woods of the Georgia interior, and, much to her dismay, she found that the land’s poor soil was not deterring these freedpeople, because, as she put, “you can’t starve a negro... They all raise a little corn and sweet potatoes, and with their facilities for catching fish and oysters, and shooting wild game, they have as much to eat as they want.” Fish and game became overtly politicized after

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emancipation, because they could both reduce freedpeople’s reliance on plantation labor and increase freedpeople’s autonomous market activities.

Faced with freedpeople’s continued reliance on fish and game, and perceiving it as a threat to orderly plantation labor, landowners began restricting the ability of black hunters to access their lands. The topic became a common one in the pages of southern agricultural and sporting periodicals, and landowners worked to enforce trespassing laws and to cordon off their land with fences.116 But as planters worked to restrict freedpeople’s ability to hunt and fish on private property, Arkansas loomed as a place with both large swaths of public land and with abundant game and fish. The Macon, Georgia, *Weekly Telegraph* printed story after story detailing the wildlife of Arkansas. In one week of 1872, for instance, the paper carried an article about the number of buffalo near the Arkansas River and another detailing how three pulls of a seine net produced four tons of fish from the same river. The year before, an article had noted that a train in Arkansas had been delayed by a flock of five hundred wild turkeys.117 For freedpeople living in areas where white hostility to black hunting was mounting, such reports threw Arkansas into high relief and advertised it as a place where common rights and common lands (and plentiful game and fish) still existed. The WPA narratives reveal that concern over fish and game, like soil and timber, motivated black migration to Arkansas.

George Braddox was born into slavery in Georgia, where he labored over Dave Geme’s cotton and corn crops. The plantation also kept guinea hens, chickens, and turkeys, and sometimes the turkeys would go off with wild turkeys and hogs that lived in the woods. Braddox

116 For discussion of the place of hunting and fishing in the politics of the postemancipation South, see Scott Giltner, *Hunting and Fishing in the New South: Black Labor and White Leisure After the Civil War* (Baltimore, 2010), esp. chap. 1, which explains how planters perceived freedpeople’s access to fish and game as part of the broader postwar “labor question.”

117 Macon *Weekly Telegraph*, Dec. 24, 1872; Dec. 31, 1872; Jan. 31, 1871. The buffalo were reported as near “the Arkansas,” meaning the Arkansas River, and were likely not in the state itself, given their typical range. But the article contributed to a general association of “Arkansas” with abundance.
likely learned to hunt while enslaved, perhaps by tracking down his owner’s turkeys, and he took those skills with him to Arkansas when he moved there after emancipation. Braddox bought a farm of 140 acres, but he kept an eye toward the state’s commons, as well. “It was easy to live if you liked to hunt,” Braddox told an interviewer in 1937. Braddox also said he would hunt and “Ship the skins and get some money when [he] couldn’t be farming.”

Hunting provided Braddox with both a source of food and extra income, likely helping him become a landowner. Braddox eventually sold his farm and bought a $300 house in Hazen, Arkansas, and he was perhaps more successful than the average former slave migrant, but many others similarly found that hunting and fishing could augment food supplies and incomes. Ellen Fitzgerald did not tell Irene Robertson when she moved to Arkansas, but she did reveal something of the information networks that helped advertise the state. “I was writing to friends,” she said. “They had immigrated, so we immigrated here and been here ever since.” Her husband worked on the railroad, and she did domestic work for white households. They did not own land or work in agriculture, but they, too, found the abundance of game made life easier. Arkansas was “nothing but woods and wild animals,” Fitzgerald said. “It wasn’t no hard times then. We had plenty to live on.”

William Harrison also never farmed in Arkansas, where he moved after mustering out of the Union Army. He settled in Madison, which he remembered as “a thriving little river town surrounded on all sides by wilderness,” and he worked as a stage coach driver and musician. But he, too, felt that “Game was the nicest thing the country afforded,” and he hunted bears and “other wild game” and caught fish in the lakes.

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118 TAS Vol. 8, pt. 1, p. 223-24 (Braddox also speaks of timber).
The abundance of open land and the lack of fence laws and other restrictions on private property—the existence of recognized common lands and common privileges, in other words—made Arkansas stand out among the southern states. While some migrants looked to these resources for fish and game, others highlighted how these resources supported livestock and grazing operations, which, as with hunting and fishing, could augment freedpeople’s subsistence abilities or their market involvement. This, too, came to be contrasted with other states of the South, where, by the 1870s, planter-aligned legislatures were beginning to pass stock and fence laws. Freedpeople especially viewed such laws as an assault on their independence, because the ability to graze stock on land they did not own helped tenant farmers and sharecroppers avoid going into debt to afford basic provisions.

Non-landowning black farmers in Arkansas did not face such restrictions on their subsistence abilities, and the lack of stock and fence laws, allowing livestock to graze on common lands, proved a draw to many migrants. Isaac Crawford, for instance, moved to Arkansas from Mississippi so that he could farm where there was “better land and no fence law.” Louvenia Huff made the same calculation, leaving Mississippi for Arkansas in 1885 because she “heard it was a better country and [had] open stock range.” North Carolina and Georgia passed local-option stock and fence laws in 1872; Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina followed between 1876 and 1880. These laws required farmers to fence their livestock or pay for damages caused by their stock. The legal structure imposed to control the so-called “labor question” in these former slave states, coupled with a less-dense population and rumors of

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123 *TAS* Vol. 9, pt. 1, p. 349. See also Malindy Maxwell, who also moved from Mississippi to Arkansas because “They said you could raise stock here—no fence law.” *TAS* Vol. 10, pt. 1, p. 63.
abundant nature in Arkansas produced a political geography revolving around access to common lands: where there were more resources and more equitable access to them, there could be more ordered and successful societies.\textsuperscript{125}

It would be easy to dismiss lofty and comparative language of the WPA interviews if they did not align with the promotional language employed by William Grey, Mifflin Gibbs, and J. T. Jenifer in the 1870s and 1880s. It would also be easy to dismiss them as being colored by the passage of time, except that they also aligned with the language used by migrants in the 1880s and 1890s. A biography of Baptist reverend W. F. Graham, published in 1892, anticipated the narratives collected by WPA writers. Graham, born in Mississippi in 1858, found himself first in Tennessee in 1870 and then Arkansas in 1872 because his parents wished to “better their condition in a freer atmosphere and on more fertile soil.” There they purchased “a rich, fertile tract of cotton land.”\textsuperscript{126} Similarly, the \textit{Indianapolis Freeman}, in writing about the migratory inducements of Pine Bluff, called Arkansas a “rumored negro paradise of the South” in 1891.\textsuperscript{127}

In these, as in many of the WPA informants’ words, Arkansas’s fertile soil and natural resources were closely linked to amorphous ideas of a better, freer society for building black communities.

Far from being controlled by just white-dominated networks of labor recruitment, the idea of Arkansas as a place of abundant nature and meaningful possibilities for black freedom and citizenship circulated through kinship and church networks, the black press, and word of mouth. Black leaders in Arkansas encouraged freedpeople from elsewhere in the South to settle

\textsuperscript{125} It is likely, too, that the amount of public land available differed between various southern states, so that not only did Arkansas not have fence laws, but it also had large amounts of land owned by federal and state governments where farmers could hunt and graze livestock. Robert Bradshaw Walz, for instance, argues that “only a few of the cis-Mississippi states, whence the bulk of Arkansas immigrants to 1880 came, contained public land. The lack of a public domain in Tennessee may help explain why that state ranked first as a source of migration into Arkansas to 1880.” Walz, “Migration into Arkansas, 1834-1880” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas, 1958), p. 5.

\textsuperscript{126} A. W. Pegues, \textit{Our Baptist Ministers and Schools} (Springfield, Mass., 1892), p. 225.

\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Indianapolis Freeman}, May 30, 1891.
in their state. They brought state machinery in line with their aims, and they worked to get white planters to support their efforts. The narrative they crafted—which drew on agrarian ideology and land-use critiques of slavery to highlight the environment of Arkansas as a material foundation from which to carve out black citizenship—resonated with freedpeople in older states with worn-out soils because it built on their own ecological antislavery ideals and experiential knowledge of land use. Freedpeople’s vernacular environmental ethos combined with the comparative geography of Grey and Gibbs to create a substantial population movement: In the three decades following emancipation, close to 200,000 freedpeople made their way to Arkansas. In their wake planters fretted over lost labor and scrambled to either stop the emigration or to imagine a system of agriculture and labor that would be based on attracting white immigration from the North and Europe. Along the Mississippi River, in the regions freedpeople were moving into, white politicians reacted to the new calculus of demographics and voting, decrying the “Africanization” of the Gulf States and scheming to redraw the South’s political boundaries. Planters faced a conundrum brought on by free black migration—they both wanted labor for cotton agriculture and feared freedpeople’s political presence. The next chapter turns to the broader context of black migration in the era of Reconstruction, exploring how planters and politicians in and beyond the South reacted to freedpeople’s movements and the emerging geographies of race and labor in postwar America.
CHAPTER 3
“A Reconstruction of the Southern Map”
Black Migration and Racial Geography in the Postwar South

The migration of freedpeople following the Civil War reshaped the world and introduced new political possibilities. Depending upon one’s point of view these new possibilities ranged from excitingly promising to deeply troubling. For the freedpeople who migrated to Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta, detailed in the preceding chapter, the possibilities introduced by migration helped them define freedom on their own terms. But the same logic that Arkansas’s black leaders used to support immigration to their state alarmed many white observers of the phenomenon. The extent to which freedpeople were leaving regions with older, more worn-out soils for more fertile ones had powerful implications for agricultural productivity and infrastructure within the South. It had even greater implications for the balance of political power if some states came to contain significant concentrations of freedpeople. As a mechanism through which white political power in the South might be displaced, by creating predominantly black states out of the richest agricultural regions, black migration threatened to truly turn the world upside down.

This chapter focuses principally on the period 1867 to 1874 and explores white reactions to black migration to examine changing ideas of race and region in the Reconstruction South. The chapter contributes directly to the growing literature on how ideas of climate and environment shaped understandings of slavery, freedom, race, and place in the nineteenth century.\footnote{This chapter engages directly with recent work by Ikuko Asaka, who explores how ideas of climate and place had worked within British and U.S. emancipation to spatially segregate white and black freedom. Asaka demonstrates} It also emphasizes the centrality of postwar black migration to the political and
intellectual history of Reconstruction. It does so by demonstrating how debates about population and migration compounded postwar issues of land use, labor systems, and even schemes to create new states. This chapter pulls attention to how the very material conditions of crop, climate, and population shaped discussions of political economy and forced postwar thinkers to envision different geographical futures for the U.S. South. Ultimately, and most ironically, by giving white commentators a mechanism with which to continue to racialize cotton agricultural labor in the absence of slavery, intra-South black migration may have contributed to the formation of a postwar racial geography based on sharecropping and cotton agriculture in the so-called black belt region of the lower South.

Importantly, this chapter shifts perspective. The previous two chapters have focused on freedpeople’s own networks of information, ideas of migration, and a state-based pro-immigration network of black leaders. This chapter instead explores the wider reaction to freedpeople’s postwar migrations. This shift in emphasis is represented in the chapter’s sources by employment that British and American intellectuals and politicians considered more temperate regions to be suitable for white settler colonialism, and more tropical regions as suitable for black freedom. Asaka argues that, after the failure of Republican schemes during the Civil War to link emancipation with colonization of freedpeople in Africa, the Caribbean, or South America, Republicans created a “symbolic and economic transformation of the U.S. South into America’s domestic tropics.” Rather than export black freedom abroad, in Asaka’s view, radical Republicans redefined the South as a tropical region fit for black freedom. I take issue with a few points of Asaka’s argument. First, I suggest that the U.S. South had been defined as a tropical region long before Republican politicians considered emancipation. Such climatic and geographical thinking, in fact, had been used to justify enslavement. Second, I hope to reveal more regional variation within the South than Asaka allows. I argue that during the Reconstruction era, rather than defining the South monolithically as a tropical region, politicians, planters, and others deepened the regional divide between the upper and lower South. The upper South was increasingly defined as a temperate region suitable for white settlement, while the lower South retained its tropical reputation. Third, rather than focus on the abstract theories of politicians and intellectuals, I show that the geographical thinking about black freedom in the Reconstruction era was grounded in and spurred by freedpeople’s migrations. It was ultimately black migration, not Republican politicians, that remade the racial geography of the postwar South. See Ikuko Asaka, *Tropical Freedom: Climate Settler Colonialism, and Black Exclusion in the Age of Emancipation* (Durham and London, 2017), esp. chap. 6. For discussion of internal colonization schemes that would constrain black freedom to particular areas, see Nicholas Guyatt, “‘An Impossible Idea?’: The Curious Career of Internal Colonization,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4.2 (June 2014), pp. 234-263; Guyatt, “‘The Future Empire of our Freedmen’: Republican Colonization Schemes in Texas and Mexico,” in *Civil War Wests: Testing the Limits of United States*, ed. by Adam Arenson and Andrew R. Graybill (Berkeley, 2015). For constructions of the South as a tropical region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Natalie J. Ring, “Inventing the Tropical South: Race, Region, and the Colonial Model,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 56.4 (Fall 2003), pp. 619-32.
of the term “population.” Reaction to migration in this period was less interested in the intimate and small-scale—the individual movements of people—and more focused on migration as a mechanism of demographic change. In a postwar period obsessed with population loss from the war, and with widespread paternalistic theories that freedpeople would die out in the absence of slavery, white commentators concentrated intently on demographics. Because the movements of freedpeople as a population held the power to reshape the demographics of the postwar South, they drew national attention and discussion. Indeed, as this chapter suggests, for many white commentators in the postwar period, the “Negro problem” was every bit as much a spatial as a social problem. In the Reconstruction era, black migration seemed to portend a dramatic rearrangement of race and place, and if freedpeople could change their physical place, they could also change their social and political place in the postwar nation. But while white commentators debated the results of postwar population movements, few questioned the general direction of or the rationale for freedpeople’s intra-South migrations, since they fit with common ideas of race and place, which held that the South was a “tropical” zone ideally suited for black labor.

Understanding the racial and geographical frameworks that white commentators used on to interpret postwar black migration requires an understanding of the ways ideas of race, labor, climate, and crop underpinned the justification of black enslavement in the Americas. By the late antebellum period, proslavery theorists had constructed an understanding of African-descended people as more suited to the environment and labor system of the plantation South.² They held

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² For the purposes of this discussion, since these ideas evolved over the course of the colonial and antebellum periods, “the South” is understood as a loose geographical term encompassing, generally, the region of the Chesapeake and farther south. This region, according to Urmi Engineer Willoughby, was perceived as “warm and humid…tropical and exotic, comparable to the colonial Caribbean.” Willoughby draws on the idea of a “greater Caribbean” to show how socially, culturally, and environmentally, the southern portion of North America, basically the region from Charleston to New Orleans, encompassed a tropical zone in contemporary geographical thinking. Urmi Engineer Willoughby, Yellow Fever, Race, and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans (Baton Rouge, La., 2017), p. 3.
that the converse was standard as well: white people, according to proslavery ideology, were
generally considered unfit for the environment of the South, and particularly for plantation labor
in the southern environment. Enslavers had defended and elaborated such racial theories for two
centuries, creating, as they did, a set of beliefs about climate, epidemiological immunity, and the
type of labor required by the cash crops of Atlantic slavery. For the argument of this chapter, the
late antebellum context is the most important, but to get there, it is necessary to briefly describe
the evolution of European conceptions of climate and race.

Ideas about the effects of climate upon human bodies accompanied European
colonization of North America and the Caribbean from the beginning. The ideas shifted over
time. Initially, Europeans believed bodies could acclimate to climates. This meant that an
English body brought to the different climate of the Americas, especially the hotter regions,
would undergo a period of adjustment to the climate. Though this idea made colonization
possible because it refuted any fixed relationship between people’s native environments and
newly encountered environments, it also meant that English bodies were subject to change by the
American environment. This environmental theory of race held concerns for white settlers who
believed they might lose their bodily integrity, and thus their whiteness and their “civilization,”
in the alien environment of America. According to historian Karen Ordahl Kupperman, colonists
worried that by “leaving England, they might be leaving their Englishness also.”

Over time, colonists came to believe that they could maintain their conceptions of themselves as white,
English, and civilized despite living in the American environment; they might suffer the effects
of a new climate, but adjustments to the climate would not alter their identities. By the end of the

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seventeenth century, experience had mediated against the conception of the relative relationship
between bodies and environments, and a view of bodies (and race) as more fixed emerged.

Over the course of the 1700s, as slavery matured as an institution and Enlightenment
science focused on the exploration of bodily difference, European thinkers came to see race as an
innate and immutable thing, rather than a product of environment.\(^4\) Living in the tropics would
not make a white person black, no more than taking an African to a temperate climate would turn
them white. But with the fixity of race came the idea that acclimation would only go so far.
White bodies, in other words, would never be as suited to tropical environments as nonwhite
bodies. That European thinkers no longer deemed race the result of climate, however, did not
mean that they viewed bodies as unaffected by environment. Quite the contrary, in fact. The
fixity of race only underscored the limits of the body, since it meant no amount of acclimation
would fundamentally alter one’s suitability for a particular foreign climate. Europeans no longer
had to worry that they might “degenerate” in foreign environments. Instead, they had to confront
the limits of their constitutions, which they believed curtailed their ability to live, and especially
to labor, in tropical climates.\(^5\)

Despite these shifts in European thinking about the relationship of climate and body, a
remarkable amount of consistency existed in climatic theories, particularly in the belief that the
earth was split into three climate zones, known as the polar, temperate, and torrid or tropical
zones.\(^6\) Each zone was defined by its average temperatures, which, it was believed, dictated the

\(^4\) For the influence of enlightenment science on European constructions of race in the eighteenth century, see

\(^5\) Kupperman, “Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience”; Joyce E. Chaplin, “Natural
Philosophy and the Early Racial Idiom in North America: Comparing English and Indian Bodies,” William and
Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser., 54.1 (January 1997), pp. 229-52

\(^6\) Such thinking derived from the Hippocratic Corpus, which emphasized the influence of environment on the body.
Chief among Hippocratic concerns were the relative heat and cold and dryness and wetness of given climates.
Hippokrate’s Airs, Waters, and Places was translated and commented on extensively in early modern Europe,
cementing a theory of environmental determinism in the era of Atlantic colonization and slavery. For overviews of
flora, fauna, disease environment, and population of each zone. Accompanying this zonal theory of climate was a belief that along with the plants and animals, people also thrived best in their native climates. Defined by heat and humidity, the tropical zone was a place of lush vegetation, rapid fertility, and an abundance of diseases. Moreover, white people believed that tropical crops such as sugar and cotton were not suited to temperate climates, and neither were people native to the tropics suited to such climates. European colonial discourse thus intertwined the logic of race with the system of tropical agriculture: the cultivation of tropical crops, in hot climates, required the bodies native to that climate. Europeans and white North Americans made this idea a standard justification for African slavery in the Americas. As historian S. Max Edelson argues, British colonists believed Africans were the ideal laborers for the agriculture of South Carolina because they “understood the transplantation of Africans as a roughly lateral movement from one hot climate to another.”

As a corollary, European colonists held that tropical climates, and especially laboring in them, were unhealthy for white bodies, which belonged in temperate climates. Turning a profit from the rich, tropical zones of colonization, in the logic of European settler colonialism, relied on the enslavement of African-descended people.

Thus, in the minds of white Americans, the slavery-justifying ideology of race as a fixed condition was intertwined with an idea of the South as a tropical environment. If European-descended people could never truly adjust enough to thrive in tropical environments, then labor in those environments must rely on African-descended people to produce the crops inherently suited to thrive there. The disease environment of the South also factored heavily into this type


of racial thinking. In the language of the day, as detailed by historian Conevery Bolton Valenčius, people spoke of the “health” or “salubrity” of places and based their decisions about where to settle on the perceived healthfulness of locales. The warmer and wetter climate of the South, especially in low-lying areas, offered an ideal environment for mosquito-borne diseases. Neither medical nor popular thought yet understood the link between mosquitoes and diseases such as yellow fever and malaria, but people understood that hot and humid climates gave rise to particular ailments.

Not everyone appeared equally susceptible to the same diseases, however. Within medical and slaveholder theories, blackness came to be associated with immunity from diseases typically present in tropical environments. Beliefs about the innate immunity of African and African-descended people were a standard component of pseudo-scientific theories of race by the early 1800s. As Urmi Engineer Willoughby has recently demonstrated, the roughly concomitant emergence of yellow fever as an endemic disease in West Africa and conditions in Europe that promoted white immigration to the United States in the 1850s contributed to a more widespread acceptance of such ideas, serving to reinforce the racial geography of health and place in the years prior to the Civil War. The epidemic of 1853, which killed between 10 and 15 percent of the population of New Orleans, for instance, had a greater rate of morbidity among white newcomers who lacked immunity to the disease. In contrast, African-descended people in the

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8 As colonization created more heavily populated urban zones along the West African coast, yellow fever epidemics in West Africa occurred more frequently, especially among European populations. By the early to mid-1800s the disease was endemic to these regions, and native African populations had a higher degree of acquired immunity because they were more likely to encounter the disease while children, when its effects are less severe. Europeans in these regions of Africa, however, encountered the disease as adults, and more frequently died from it. During the same period in which Europeans were encountering yellow fever as an endemic disease in West Africa, the upheavals of the revolution of 1848 and the Irish famine were driving European immigration into America. Observers noted that non-immune white populations were encountering the same disease in Africa and the U.S. South, while black populations in both places appeared less susceptible. See Willoughby, Yellow Fever, Race, and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans, pp. 24-9, 63.
area had a higher degree of immunity because many of them had previously encountered the
disease in Africa, the Caribbean, or elsewhere in the U.S. South. During epidemics, they
therefore were less likely to suffer and die from yellow fever, and the difference in rates of
morbidity and mortality could be dramatic. According to Willoughby, “European immigrants
formed less than half of the city’s population in 1853, yet they accounted for 90 percent of the
recorded yellow fever deaths.” The epidemic of 1853 spread to other cities connected to New
Orleans through trade, making its way up the Mississippi River and into the heart of the
antebellum cotton frontier, providing more data that confirmed proslavery ideology.
Contemporary white observers, lacking an understanding of epidemiology and immunity, saw
black resistance to yellow fever as evidence of innate biological difference.

Indeed, white southerners’ beliefs about African-descended people’s unique ability to
survive in the disease environment of southern lowlands, especially swamplands and coastal
zones, gave rise to black majorities in particularly fertile regions of the South, such as the rice-
growing areas of South Carolina and Georgia, the sugar bowl of Louisiana, and the cotton-
growing alluvial plains of the Mississippi valley. Convincing themselves such areas were
inhospitable to white health, planters tended to avoid exposure to the environment of these
regions as much as possible. And while some believed white people could live in those regions
without risking their health, few adherents to biological conceptions of race believed white
people could sustain manual labor in hot and humid climates without falling prey to lowland

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10 Importantly, historians of health and medicine have recently exposed the ways perception and belief influenced
how observers interpreted the interaction of race and disease, and they have pointed to the fallacy of ideas of innate
genetic predispositions toward immunity to yellow fever among African-descended people. Indeed, African
American’s own accounts of yellow fever epidemics show widespread susceptibility to and suffering from tropical
diseases in America. See Willoughby, *Yellow Fever, Race, and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* and
fevers. Thus, as Valenčius puts it, “the geography of health created a racial topography.”\textsuperscript{11} Diseases helped differentiate the South as a tropical zone and reinforced the logic of racial slavery.\textsuperscript{12}

The intertwined issues of disease, climate, and labor became primary components of late antebellum proslavery theory. Such proslavery racial theory was perhaps most developed by Samuel Cartwright, a well-known southern physician who, in the late 1850s, lived in New Orleans. Generally, he held that slavery was necessary, and even a positive good, because “The white man cannot endure toil under the burning sun of the cane and cotton field, and live to enjoy the fruits of his labor.” Cartwright’s pro-slavery racial theory is worth quoting at length, as it gives a good overview of the language and ideas employed to racialize southern agricultural labor. Cartwright argued in the late antebellum period that if black laborers were removed from southern fields,

and their place supplied with double the number of white men, agricultural labor in the South would also cease, as far as sugar and cotton are concerned, for the want of muscles that could endure exercise in the smothering heat of a cane or cotton field. Half the white laborers of Illinois are prostrated with fevers from a few days’ work in stripping blades in a Northern cornfield, owing to the confinement of the air by the close proximity of the plants. Cane and cotton plants form a denser foliage than corn; a thick jungle, where the white man pants for breath, and is overpowered by the heat of the sun at one time of day, and chilled by the dews and moisture of the plants at another. Negroes glory in a close, hot atmosphere; they instinctively cover their heads and faces with a blanket at night, and prefer lying with their heads to the fire, instead of their feet. This ethnical peculiarity is in harmony with their efficiency as laborers in a hot, damp, close, suffocating atmosphere—where instead of suffering and dying, as the white man would, they are healthier, happier and more prolific than in their native Africa—producing, under the white man’s will, a great variety of agricultural products, besides upwards of three million bales of cotton, and three hundred thousand hogsheads of sugar.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Although Valenčius discusses healing springs as places to restore health from 1820s through 1850s, and places such as Hot Spring, Arkansas, were certainly understood as restorative southern locales in the nineteenth century, it was not until the early 1900s that a widespread culture of “going south” for health emerged. See Valenčius, \textit{The Health of the Country}, pp. 153-54 and Catherine Cocks, \textit{Tropical Whites: The Rise of the Tourist South in the Americas} (Philadelphia, 2013).
\textsuperscript{13} Samuel Cartwright, “Ethnology of the Negro or Prognathous Race: A Lecture delivered Nov. 30, 1857, before the N.O. Academy of Science,” p. 9. (first quote p. 6) Notice that Cartwright’s explanation centers on ideas of crop,
While this was clearly rhetorical justification for the existence of slavery in the face of mounting abolitionism, suggesting that it was a necessary condition for producing the crops that drove American capitalist expansion, it was also a theory of racial geography. Cartwright and other proslavery ideologues helped reinforce the idea that black people were uniquely suited to the environment and crops of the U.S. South.

Such thinking was not limited to elite circles of medicine or proslavery ideologues. Mainstream geography education reflected slaveholders’ axioms. The 1860 edition of Mitchell’s School Geography, a Philadelphia-published and widely used textbook, for instance, included questions and answers about the divisions of the earth. The so-called “torrid zone” was noted as “the hottest part of the Earth” and “the seat of dangerous and deadly diseases.” Question 198 asked pupils, “For what is the Torrid Zone remarkable?” The supplied answer: “For the finest fruits, many of the most useful vegetable productions.” Question 203 asked “What are the complexion and the habits of the people of the Torrid Zone?” Answer: “They are generally of a dark or black color, and indolent and effeminate in their habits.” Furthermore, “They are seldom distinguished for industry, enterprise, or learning.” The temperate zone, however, was noted as possessing “a more equal and healthy climate than any other parts of the earth.” Known as a land of “Corn, wheat, and rice, with apples, peaches, pears, olives, and figs,” the temperate zone, in contrast to the torrid zone, was home to people with “white or fair complexions, and generally

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more strength of body and mind.” Temperate zone peoples were “The most civilized and improved portion of mankind.”

As suggested by the logic of a common geography textbook, climate dictated what grew where, and as slavery spread as an institution through the antebellum period, ideas about types of agriculture furthered the spatial differentiation of the South, providing another layer of its distinct racial geography. The links between climate, health, and the status of “civilization” were strong, too. Temperate climates hosted civilized crops and ordered societies, while tropical environments nurtured fast-growing, extractive cash crops and tended toward “savage” societies. Put another way, Nature ruled the tropics, while Man ruled the temperate zone, and the type of agriculture suitable to each zone followed likewise. By the antebellum period, many Americans held strong beliefs about the innate differences between northern and southern agriculture. Moreover, not only were the crops themselves different, but northern critics had also begun to disparage the plantation system as wasteful, slovenly, and degrading to land and labor.

From about the 1820s, agricultural reform projects, and then the emergence of Republican Party agrarian ideology in the 1850s, according to Philip Mills Herrington, produced a moral vision of agriculture that “championed intimacy between proprietor and landscape.”

Agricultural theorists during this period developed a set of beliefs emphasizing “scientific” and “improved” approaches to farming, which stressed the relationship among landownership, land use, and society. To proponents of this approach, “the ideal farm was relatively small, diversified…, and studded with conspicuously permanent buildings that signaled the proprietor’s

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commitment to place.” It followed that landscapes dotted with such farms were “productive, salubrious, beautiful, diversified, and permanent, while their ‘bad’ counterparts were sterile, unhealthy, ugly, vulnerable to foreign markets, and readily abandoned.” The bad counterparts to small, proprietor-operated farms were, of course, plantations worked by enslaved laborers. As Herrington argues, the nineteenth-century agricultural reform movement that prized small, diversified farms contributed to the development of an environmental, or agrarian, critique of slavery as a system of agriculture. Agrarian critics of slavery believed that plantations represented sloppy, wasteful agriculture that wore out soils and left, in their wake, eroded landscapes and degraded, immoral societies.17 Herrington suggests that agricultural theorists and agrarian intellectuals used the environmental critique of slavery to develop important geographical distinctions: as “farm” got set against “plantation,” “free soil” was set against “slave soil.” The “plantation” as an agricultural and spatial unit set the South apart from the North and Midwest, where free soil ideals encouraged the creation of small farms owned by virtuous white settlers.18

Importantly, both the environmental critique of slave soil and geographical concerns about climate and race were transatlantic: both were popular discourses about the U.S. South in Britain, and likely helped portray the South as a place for immigrants to avoid. An 1842 publication in England, for instance, warned about the dangers white settlers faced in tropical

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17 In reality, planters in many parts of the South grew extractive crops on marginal soils, and so their preferred systems of slash-and-burn agriculture made ecological sense. To critics, however, it looked like a system designed to promote wasted, eroded landscapes and impermanent societies. Plantations were not, in other words, perceived as models of idyllic agrarian virtue, and they were further seen as spaces for black labor, as white labor on a plantation was viewed as degrading. See Steven Stoll, Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth Century America (New York, 2002), pp. 124-39.
18 Herrington, “The Exceptional Plantation,” pp. 4-5. Herrington further suggests that the critique of the plantation and the contrast between “free soil” and “slave soil” contributed to increasing sectional tensions prior to the Civil War. See also Adam Weasley Dean, An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill, 2015).
environments, arguing that “We have planted the white man in America, and there he degenerates.”¹⁹ Indeed, Britain considered questions of climate often in the nineteenth century because of its imperial projects in India, where it was commonly accepted that Britons could control and manage India, but not permanently reside there. An 1858 publication on the health of British soldiers in India, for instance, held that Europeans were unsuited for “long exposure to the sun in a Tropical continent without serious damage to the Constitution.”²⁰ For the same reason, British officials had abandoned settling white farmers in the Caribbean as early as the 1780s.²¹ To compound matters, by the 1820s, British antislavery activists had adopted the environmental critique of slavery to disparage the plantation landscape of the South.²²

Together, these ideas presented Europeans with an image of the U.S. South as a place with a sickly climate and an immoral system of land use. For prospective immigrants, the South was not an inviting place, and it was readily contrasted with the Midwest, a landscape held by popular perception as both salubrious and meant for free-soil settlement. In the antebellum period, ideas of climate, labor, and race hindered white immigration into the South, while the midwestern states actively and successfully recruited European immigrants.²³ The perception of the South as a place unfit for white immigration had a measurable effect: the South’s foreign-born population lagged far behind other regions of the U.S. between 1850 and 1900.²⁴

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¹⁹ The publication grouped “America” into the same climatic regime as the Caribbean, portraying the whole as unsuited for white habitation. See David N. Livingstone, “The Moral Discourse of Climate: Historical Considerations on Race, Place, and Virtue,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 17.4 (1991), pp. 417-18.


²¹ Harrison, “‘The Tender Frame of Man,’” p. 79.


²⁴ Walter L. Fleming, “Immigration to the Southern States,” *Political Science Quarterly* 20.2 (June 1905), pp. 276-97. Fleming argues that ideas of a hot and sickly climate, as well as a common perception that only cotton grew in the South, kept most northern and European immigration out of the South in the antebellum and Reconstruction eras.
observers in Europe and the U.S. North conflated ideas of climate, labor, and race to mark the South as a “black” place, and thus one unfit for white free-soil settlement. Ideas of race and place therefore limited the spaces of slavery and freedom in the antebellum period. In nineteenth-century white European and American thinking, according to historian Ikuko Asaka, “freedom figured as a geographic condition marked by racial difference and climatic character.”

The discussion so far has viewed “the South” as a whole, and for the ways ideas of climate and labor mediated against white immigration, the South often functioned as a single monolithic unit. But important regional variations had emerged within the South, becoming especially notable in the years from 1800 to 1860. For the ways free black migration in the postwar period would remake the South’s racial geographies, these regional distinctions mattered, too. Primarily they revolved around a crop and labor divergence between the upper and lower South. In the older southeastern states, namely Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, longer-farmed soils had deteriorated and crop production, especially of the region’s main crop, tobacco, had declined between 1800 and 1850. As staple production declined, so did plantations as agricultural units. During the same period, territory acquired through the Louisiana Purchase and the expulsion of Native Americans, along with the invention of the cotton gin, had spurred a rapid movement toward the Mississippi River.

As slavery expanded westward, two distinct slave societies spread outward from the eastern seacoast. The lower South, where rice, sugar, and especially cotton grew best, emerged as a land dominated by large slaveholders. The states of the lower South region included Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas. The upper South, encompassing


Virginia, most of North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri, was not as well suited to the crops of the lower South. In these areas, slaveholders tended to own fewer slaves relative to their lower South counterparts, and they more often engaged in mixed agricultural operations that included tobacco, hemp, corn, wheat, and, especially in Tennessee, some cotton.\textsuperscript{26}

The southwestern cotton frontier was the main driver of the emerging regional variation in the South: its soils provided a return on investment that older, thinner soils in the East could not compete with. Tobacco, the great eighteenth-century driver of slavery in the Chesapeake, declined in its importance by 1800 as production fell and cotton emerged as the South’s most important crop. Slaveowners in the upper South, particularly older states like Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, therefore diversified their crops and modernized slave employment through trades such as ship-building, transportation, and urban skilled artisanal labor. The relative expansion of the cotton frontier and decline of agriculture the Chesapeake region created a differential need for enslaved labor within the South. In the older states, as one scholar has recently put it, “the supply of slaves…came to far outweigh the demand.”\textsuperscript{27} Accordingly, as staple production and plantations declined in these regions, so did the relative proportion of enslaved population to white population. Conversely, the ratio of planters to small farmers, and thus enslaved people to white people, increased in the cotton regions of the antebellum lower South.\textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{27} Damian Alan Pargas, \textit{Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South} (New York, 2015), p. 25.

In terms of environment and economy, these two regions were drawing further apart. Nonetheless they were yoked into a single political economy by the dynamics of the domestic slave trade. The excess supply of slaves in the upper South helped fuel the spread of slavery into the lower South. The demand for labor in the cotton and sugar areas of the Southwest meant that, as agricultural uses for enslaved people in the upper Southeast decreased, the chattel principle—the idea of enslaved people as readily transferable assets—kept slavery profitable in the older states. As Walter Johnson puts it, “Long after intensive tobacco farming had eroded the fertility and profitability of the slave-cultivated fields of the Chesapeake, the slave trade enabled Virginia and Maryland planters to retain their ties to the political economy of slavery…. [T]he slave trade bound the diverging fortunes of the emerging regions of the South into mutual benefit.”

Though some politicians and boosters in states like Virginia had begun to consider how to encourage white immigration and build Virginia into a state for free-soil settlement, slavery had halted progress toward policies in line with that idea. Put simply, because of the slave trade, Virginia continued to profit from its black population and really had no reason to consider what the state would look like in the absence of that population. Virginians had only briefly considered what it would mean to have a large non-enslaved black population in the state.

29 Walter Johnson, Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 215. Johnson complicates this claim in his more recent book, River of Dark Dreams, chap. 4, suggesting that cotton planters’ schemes in the late 1850s of reopening the slave trade and filibustering in South America to expand the empire of cotton were opposed by planters in the older eastern states, who viewed such moves as a threat to their economic positions. Johnson writes, “The very trade that made it possible to speak of ‘a political economy of slavery’ that stretched from Maryland and Virginia to Mississippi and Louisiana had, concealed within it, a mechanism of economic differentiation that pitted the interests of the sections against one another.” (p. 404) The idea of reopening the slave trade from Africa, which would have disadvantaged planters in the older eastern states, did the most to reveal these tensions. But the efforts to reopen the trade never succeeded, and though the potential for discord existed, it never outweighed the mutual advantage the sections received through the domestic slave trade.

30 In the aftermath of Nat Turner’s rebellion in Virginia, legislators there considered the future of slavery in the state. Some called for its abolition, basing their arguments on appeals to climate and denying “any environmental justification for slavery in Virginia,” likening Virginia and the upper South with “the potential to become a southern Ohio or Illinois.” Those who supported such a view wanted to emancipate the state’s slaves and colonize them in Liberia, and populate the state with white settlers. Proslavery legislators responded by citing the physical impossibility of cultivating the “burning environment” of Virginia’s eastern plantations without slave labor. See
Ultimately, because the internal slave trade united the upper and lower Souths into a single political and economic unit, white southerners could downplay the inherent tensions of the emerging regional divergence. The antebellum South was a space defined by enslaved black labor, with important regional differences, but tied together politically and economically by the slave market and the cotton crop.

The Civil War both built on and exposed the growing regional differences between the upper and lower South, particularly in how those regions defined their need for black labor and slavery. Mississippi announced its secession with an appeal to a climatic need for enslaved black labor, for instance, declaring itself a tropical state in its effort to establish a modern slave republic. The state’s secessionists claimed they were “thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery,” which provided the products that composed the “largest and most important portions of commerce of the earth.” However, they continued, “These products are peculiar to the climate verging on the tropical regions, and by an imperious law of nature, none but the black race can bear exposure to the tropical sun.” Since the world needed cotton, and since only black people could handle laboring in the climate conducive for cotton, Mississippi needed slavery, and it needed secession. For Mississippi secessionists, maintaining the racial geography of slavery outweighed a commitment to national territorial unity.31

The upper South, which grew less cotton, did not share Mississippi’s tropical climate or its devotion to the racial geography. Missouri and Kentucky did not join the Confederacy—their position in the upper South made them less suited for cotton, and though they remained slave


31 “A Declaration Of the immediate causes which induce and justify the secession of the State of Mississippi from the Federal Union,” quoted in *Proceedings of the Mississippi State Convention, Held January 7th to 26th A.D. 1861* (Jackson, Miss., 1861), p. 47.
states during the Civil War, their commitments to slavery’s capital, not its racial geography. West Virginia went further. In separating from the Confederate state of Virginia, West Virginia enacted gradual emancipation and prohibited the import of slaves and the immigration of free black people in its founding charter. Composed of upcountry and mountainous terrain, West Virginia had an enslaved population of twelve thousand in 1860 and did not have an extensive plantation economy. The state thus fell into the upper South environmental profile identified by many white Americans as suitable for white settlement.

The Wheeling convention that met to draft the constitution of the new state of West Virginia voted forty-eight to one in favor of a provision that specified that “No slave shall be brought, or free person of color be permitted to come into this State for permanent residence.” The delegates also favored linking emancipation with colonization, so that West Virginia would contain neither slaves nor free black folk. The U.S. Congress, in stipulating that West Virginia must enter the Union as a free state, struck down the language of the provision that prohibited slave imports and free black immigration; the 1863 West Virginia constitution dropped any reference to prohibiting free black immigration, substituting in its place a specific schedule and plan for gradual emancipation. Nonetheless, the crisis of secession brought West Virginia in line with midwestern states, such as Indiana, that had prohibited black immigration in their fundamental law. The Civil War exposed regional fault lines in the South’s racial geography. Emancipation deepened those divisions.

As freedpeople began migrating toward the southwestern states in the postwar years, they further upset the racial geography of slavery and forced the South to grapple with the spatial and demographic legacies of slavery. This antebellum background became the prevailing framework white commentators used to explain postwar black migration and the prevailing system hindering adjustments to that migration. Beliefs about the climatic and natural laws of the South had created a complex of place-based perceptions and practices. On the one hand, those perceptions and practices forestalled white efforts to adjust to postwar migration. On the other hand, those practices and perceptions, based on unchanged and immutable “nature,” were being undone by the changing laws of emancipation and Reconstruction. Emancipation threatened to bring politics in line with nature in the South.

Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the war, a former Union general and candidate for the governorship of Ohio proposed an internal colonization scheme to create an exclusive territory for freedpeople in the South. Put forward by Jacob Dolson Cox, the plan called for the U.S. government to “take contiguous territory in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Florida” to “organize the freedmen in a dependence of the Union analogous to the Western territories.” To supporters of the plan, it not only provided a ready solution to logistical problems of emancipation, but it also reflected popular thinking about race and place, since it envisioned confining black freedom to a “tropical” region. Cox’s plan never garnered much support, though it did arouse considerable discussion. Historian Nicholas Guyatt, who has studied Cox’s plan and related movements, argues that the idea of internal colonization shows that “In the summer of 1865, the racial geographies of the United States were unusually fluid.” Despite the failure of

35 Jacob Dolson Cox, “Oberlin Letter,” quoted in Guyatt, “‘An Impossible Idea?,’” p. 234. See also Guyatt, “‘The Future Empire of our Freedmen.’”
36 Guyatt, “‘An Impossible Idea?,’” p. 256.
Cox’s vision, however, those geographies remained in flux beyond 1865. And they remained in flux, I argue, not because of the schemes of white politicians, but because emancipation, migration, and the southern environment seemed to many to have the power to remake the human geography of the postwar South. To be sure, southern planters may have scoffed at Cox’s scheme, and indeed few people North or South supported it, but nor did they question its inherent logic. The environment of the South, in popular white thought, still required black labor, regardless of emancipation, and that legacy of race and place, when coupled with free black migration in the postwar era, seemed to many white observers to have the power to redraw the southern map.

The war disrupted southern agriculture, and the cotton crop was small and worrying in the years immediately following the war. A system of free labor emerged only chaotically and piecemeal. Freedpeople wanted their own land and were weary of working for former enslavers; planters distrusted formerly enslaved people and thought them worthless as free laborers. By the late 1860s planters and white commentators north and south had begun to consider alternatives to free black labor. The leading ideas were Chinese labor, which the British had pursued in the wake of emancipation in the West Indies, and white immigration from the North or Europe.\footnote{Moon-Ho Jung, “Outlawing ‘Coolies’: Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation,” \textit{American Quarterly} 57.3 (Sept. 2005), pp. 677-701.} Those who suggested such ideas, however, fought against the popular antebellum conception that the South was unfit for white settlement and that its crops required black, or at least nonwhite, labor. Boston cotton brokers F. W. Loring and C. F. Atkinson surveyed planters in early 1869 to feel out the situation of southern agriculture and the prospects for black labor and white immigration. They received replies from more than 200 planters, which they edited, collated with newspaper articles and agricultural reports, and published. The varied replies and reports
presented general impressions about the environment and agriculture of the postwar South that prefigured the more widespread discussions about intra-South black migration. The planter’s responses illustrate the prevailing racial geographical thinking in the postwar white South.

Many of the respondents felt that efforts to encourage white labor should be pursued. Loring and Atkinson had, after all, inquired specifically about the prospects of immigration, and many planters addressed questions of climate, health, and labor to counter ideas about white labor’s unsuitability for cotton agriculture. But suggestions of white settlement were almost always accompanied with the necessity of land reform. Harkening back to the environmental critique of slavery, which by now seemed widespread among even southern planters, many respondents pointed to the declining fertility of southern soils and said white farmers, working smaller plots and using fertilizers and improved techniques, would be necessary to restore the soil and rebuild the region on a basis of white free labor. The argument was rather chicken-and-egg: white farmers needed small farms, and rebuilding the South required small farmers to rebuild the soil. Many assumed freedpeople were incapable of careful land management. A planter from Danbury, Georgia, for instance, complained that freed women no longer worked in the fields and the men “are loafing around town” and suggested that “If we could get good immigrants to come and lease or buy our lands, and work on a small scale, and manure highly, it

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38 Slaveholders, and an older line of historiography, considered enslaved people to be bad farmers and unable to work without direction from white supervisors. U. B. Phillips, for instance, referred to enslaved labor as “unintelligent” and “stupid labor,” and suggested only the routinization of agricultural work made slavery functional. Phillips, “The Origin and Growth of the Southern Black Belts,” pp. 804, 805. This interpretation has been challenged by work that explores enslaved people’s understandings of land and ecology, pointing out, as Walter Johnson does, that since enslaved people did the actual farm labor, they possessed experiential knowledge of farming that often surpassed the planters’ theoretical knowledge. See Johnson, River of Dark Dreams, pp. 162-66. Moreover, Erin Stewart Mauldin’s recent essay on the environmental history of sharecropping shows that formerly enslaved sharecroppers lacked incentives to practice careful land management, and what postwar observers saw as poor land use was less a reflection on the skill or knowledge of the sharecroppers, and more an indictment of the contract system itself and black resistance to exploitative tenancy farming. See Mauldin, “Freedom, Economic Autonomy, and Ecological Change in the Cotton South, 1865-1880,” Journal of the Civil War Era 7.3 (Sept. 2017), 401-24. Nonetheless, and as reflected in Loring and Atkinson’s respondents, it was a common belief at the time that enslaved and freedpeople could engage in only crude and simple forms of agriculture.
would pay.” And about the inability of freedpeople to practice better farming methods, another planter wrote there was a “considerable enquiry for commercial manures, and a disposition to procure implements to facilitate labor.” But, he continued, “This applies solely to the whites. Where negroes are renters, their mode of cultivation is careless and slovenly, cultivation negligent and results in failures, in four of five cases.”

Most of the respondents who called for white immigration, however, felt the need to qualify it spatially. Not everywhere in the South, and not all types of labor, they thought, were suitable for white northerners or Europeans. A planter from Jefferson County, Mississippi, noted, “The impression has gone abroad that no white man can work in our climate in the summer.” Rather than dispute the statement whole cloth, the planter argued for a racial geography of health and labor within his own state. “But in the poorer, piney woods districts, white men and women are the only laborers….There is no doubt but that men from Germany, France, Scotland and Ireland can do well in the uplands, raising cotton. If they emigrate here, and settle up the States of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, the negroes will go the swamp lands of Louisiana and Arkansas, where their labor pays much better than in the uplands.”

Another Mississippi planter claimed that, though his county bordered the Mississippi River, “it is almost entirely upland, and I expect as healthy as your state [Massachusetts].” Many of the respondents who supported ideas of white immigration suggested that upland regions, even in the more southern states, were healthy enough to be farmed by immigrants from the North or Europe.

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40 Loring and Atkinson, *Cotton Culture and the South Considered with Reference to Emigration*, p. 53.
41 Loring and Atkinson, *Cotton Culture and the South Considered with Reference to Emigration*, p. 93. Emphasis in original.
42 Loring and Atkinson, *Cotton Culture and the South Considered with Reference to Emigration*, p. 115.
The planters who offered qualified perceptions about where white immigration should flow fought against the prevailing current, which held that productivity in the South, and especially the profitability of cotton, required black labor. About this, many respondents were direct. “The negro is the only successful laborer that can be put in the field to cultivate and gather a crop of cotton,” wrote one.\(^{43}\) Another declared, “The African seems to be peculiarly adapted by nature to the cultivation of cotton in this country.” He blamed the work load and the heat, and concluded simply, “The African don’t mind it—the white man won’t stand it.”\(^{44}\) An Alabama planter went as far as to suggest white immigration would decrease the cotton crop. He called for an increase of labor that is “adapted to the climate,” by which he meant nonwhite people. He continued, “I am satisfied that if the South were peopled as thick as the New England States, with European immigrants, there would be less cotton raised there than now.”

Interestingly, however, this planter thought that white farmers could be successful in the South if they abandoned cotton. “Europeans and Northerner immigrants,” he concluded, could “raise wheat, corn, etc., cultivated in early spring in cool weather.”\(^{45}\) Labor and crop, as much as climate, could dictate who should farm where. One planter put his hope in finding the right kind of European laborer. “In the choice of emigrants,” he wrote, “I think that the Latin, rather than the Anglo Saxon races, should be preferred, as less likely to be affected by climate.” Wedded to racialized ideas of place and labor, he added a final thought, “nor do I think that the African emigration should be ignored.”\(^{46}\) In the minds of many planters, the continued cultivation of cotton necessitated nonwhite labor in the southern environment.

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\(^{43}\) Loring and Atkinson, *Cotton Culture and the South Considered with Reference to Emigration*, p. 15.  
\(^{44}\) Loring and Atkinson, *Cotton Culture and the South Considered with Reference to Emigration*, p. 71.  
\(^{45}\) Loring and Atkinson, *Cotton Culture and the South Considered with Reference to Emigration*, p. 87.  
\(^{46}\) Loring and Atkinson, *Cotton Culture and the South Considered with Reference to Emigration*, p. 8.
Yet many planters held that at least some portions of the South, primarily the upper South, and the uplands of the lower South, were healthy for white settlement. A New Orleans respondent gave a detailed account and described the lowlands of Georgia and South Carolina, especially the Sea Islands, as prone to “miasmatic influences which produce intermittent fever.” This was rarely fatal, in his experience, but was “sometimes extremely obstinate and debilitating.” He suggested white immigrants avoid those regions, and noted that “The African can live there with impunity.” Instead, he suggested, “The whole of Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee, three-fourths of Georgia, Texas and Arkansas, and one-half at least of South Carolina, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, offer suitable and healthy homes for the white man.”

Loring and Atkinson agreed with this reading of the racial geography, though they hoped that Chinese laborers would be a substitute for freedpeople if one was needed. They envisioned a postwar South divided along an environmentally determined fault line of labor arrangement and race:

> Of the two immigrations which are likely to set towards our shores, the European and Chinese, the former would probably seek the more northern latitudes of the cotton growing regions, whose healthier uplands promise, by the use of manure and the careful garden culture possible only on small farms, to become the homes of a population of thrifty farmers—whilst the rich alluvial bottom lands are left to be cultivated in larger tracts, by organized capital, with black and Chinese labor, better fitted to withstand the malarial influences, and the hotter sun of those parts.

Though readers of Loring and Atkinson’s book may have left it with conflicting ideas about the future of cotton culture and white immigration in the South, they would also have encountered a coherent racial geography of the section. Loring and Atkinson, and many of their respondents, believed that cotton production, especially in the more fertile lowland regions, required black or at least nonwhite labor, which they held to be racially suited to the environment.

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47 Loring and Atkinson, *Cotton Culture and the South Considered with Reference to Emigration*, p. 91.
48 Loring and Atkinson, *Cotton Culture and the South Considered with Reference to Emigration*, p. 98.
Nathan Cook Meeker, a correspondent for the New York *Tribune*, toured the South in 1869 and noticed a similar geography of land, crop, and race.\(^49\) Between the months of May and July, Meeker made his way through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. He wrote about his travels in ten articles published in the *Tribune* between May and October. From the start, Meeker paid attention to how land and crops related to race and immigration. His second article, for instance, reported on his travels through Virginia, and he took particular note of the state’s worn-out soil now covered with second-growth pine forests. He suggested northern immigration would be necessary to make such lands productive; neither planters nor freedpeople, he thought, possessed the skills and knowledge needed: “If managed by men who know how to farm, it could be cleared, restored, and kept fertile; by the negros and native Virginians it will grow corn a few years, and die again.”\(^50\)

Meeker echoed the antebellum environmental critique of slavery and blamed both enslavers and the enslaved for the state of agriculture in the upper South, arguing that it was the “inevitable tendency” of slavery to “impoverish the soil.” “Thus the close of the war left Virginia…with a worn out soil and with a rural population incapable of restoring” the land.\(^51\) Additionally, when he traveled along a river bottom, which he noted as “miles of some of the best farms in the United States” with inexhaustible soil, he also noted that “ague must be common in fall.” Meeker, too, noticed that the most fertile lands were often the least healthy.

Meeker’s geographical thinking continued to develop during his tour, and his visit to North Carolina in May proved important for the full vision he would eventually propose that fall.

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\(^{49}\) The series of articles is signed “N.C.M.” Personal correspondence with Sarah Saxe, curator of collections at the City of Greeley Museums, Greeley, Colorado, confirms that those initial belong to Nathan Cook Meeker. Meeker was the *Tribune*’s agriculture editor, and he founded Union Colony in Colorado in 1870 with backing from Horace Greeley. The colony was a religious agrarian homesteading utopian community that practiced extensive irrigation to demonstrate the viability of agriculture in Colorado (which was, at that time, primarily dependent on mining).

\(^{50}\) New York *Tribune*, May 29, 1869, p. 2.

\(^{51}\) New York *Tribune*, June 14, 1869, p. 2.
Conditions in North Carolina drew Meeker’s attention to the geographic legacy of the internal slave trade. He noted the poverty among freedpeople in North Carolina, and even ventured that “they do not seem to have improved their condition by being made free.” He observed “a colored woman plowing along in a large, poor field.” Noting the related impoverishment of both soil and freedpeople, Meeker diagnosed the problem: “Evidently this had been a slave-breeding region.” Meeker explained, “for years must have passed since the soil could have produced any other paying crop beside human beings.” If freedpeople’s wages were depressed in the region, it was “because the soil produces so little.”52 He saw little hope for freedpeople’s future in North Carolina, but farther south, he found greater promise. In South Carolina, Meeker mused about the connection between a tired freed woman, home to nurse her baby after a long day working on Sea Island cotton, and wealthy, northern white women who would eventually wear that cotton once manufactured. He ended this image “with the hope that one day she and her’s [the freed woman and her child] may stand upon soil they can call their own.”53 Not only did the land of South Carolina appear more fertile, but the geography of health, Meeker suggested, supported this hope, for the Sea Island plantations were “not considered safe for white men…for the reason that they are liable to attacks of ‘country fever.’” Unlike the New Orleans planter cited by Loring and Atkinson, Meeker claimed such fevers were often fatal, but he clarified that black people “are exempt.”54

Meeker concluded his tour and returned to New York in August 1869. From there he put together a more comprehensive geographical vision of the postwar South. In its perception of the geography of race, it mirrored that of Loring and Atkinson, yet Meeker hoped that freedpeople

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52 New York Tribune, June 18, 1869, p. 2.
53 New York Tribune, June 30, 1869, p. 2
54 New York Tribune, July 5, 1869, p. 2.
would become owners of the land, rather than subject to the “organized capital” the cotton brokers envisioned. Like them, however, Meeker intended his racial geography as a plan for “how to grow cotton and solve the negro question.” He combined his various observations about the slave trade, disease environment, soil fertility, and race to flesh-out his plan. “The first difficulty lying in way of settlement [of the problem] is presented in the fact that Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky, were formerly devoted to breeding slaves for the cotton and sugar regions; but, now that no slaves can be sold, a large source of the revenue is cut off, and with an impoverished soil, they are burdened with a population which cannot…be profitably employed.” These areas, wrote Meeker, “utter Macedonian cries for Northern men to come down and improve the vacant land, [and] drive out the negros, or at least outvote them.” He saw little hope for a black future in the upper South and argued there was “no possible chance in the old slave-breeding States for the freedman to become a landed proprietor, or even to lead his own race in political or social affairs.”

Meeker offered a solution. “But there is a region of the South in which, by reason of physical condition, the negro can become the dominant race, can become a proprietor of the soil, and where, in time, he can receive full intellectual development.” The place for black freedom, in Meeker’s racial geography, was “the Cotton region: and it embraces part of North Carolina, all of South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama (except the mountains), Mississippi, Louisiana, most of Texas, and part of Arkansas.” Here, he wrote, the bulk of the cotton for the global trade can be grown without the need for fertilizers, but it “cannot be called a healthful region…particularly to the White man.” Climate dictated the geography of cotton and race: “a White man cannot engage in labor as can the Blacks, and at the same time retain his energies as he would retain them in the

Piedmont of Virginia, and in the mountain regions of North Carolina, and of East Tennessee; and hence we need never expect that any White race can grow the cotton that is to clothe the world.” Thus, he concluded, “the freedmen in the Border States should seek the cotton region, lying within the black belt, and consolidate themselves as a cotton-growing people.” He encouraged them to save money and purchase land once there. With black-owned small farms in the cotton-region of the lower South, Meeker declared, it would be possible to “send out from that glorious region, so redeemed, ten, instead of three millions of bales” of cotton. Meeker’s racial geography may have contemplated a circumscribed black freedom, but it was also one that envisioned black autonomy among the most fertile soils of the postwar South.\(^56\) It was an echo of Cox’s internal colonization scheme, achieved not by force or coercion but through a system of free migration and the long-term accumulation of capital among freedpeople.\(^57\)

For years, white southerners had used the racial geography of crop, climate, and health to justify enslavement of black people. That same logic now threatened to turn a considerable portion of the South into an exclusive space for black freedom. Though Meeker’s article took no notice of whether freedpeople were, in fact, seeking the cotton-growing regions as migratory destinations, other commentators had begun to notice such a movement. Against a context of visions such as Cox’s and Meeker’s, such movements alarmed those who noticed them, especially because even Meeker’s more moderate plan implied that freedpeople would become the primary owners, producers, and beneficiaries of the southern cotton crop.

\(^{56}\) All quotes in this paragraph drawn from New York *Tribune*, Oct. 30, 1869, p. 2. Meeker further expanded on his views of race and health: “That the Black man can endure a hot climate, has always been granted: for it has given him his color, and this color, rightly considered, is a protection against heat and malaria.”

\(^{57}\) Cox, too, had suggested freedpeople would voluntarily migrate to his proposed exclusive southern territory, but he had also desired federal intervention to set the territory apart. Meeker, in contrast, saw free migration, coupled with the slow accumulation of property and political power, as the way freedpeople would gradually secure the lower South for themselves.
The New York *Evening Post* carried an article in 1868, for instance, discussing the “remarkable and general migration of freedmen from the border and other states to the extreme south and southwest.” The writer explained that “Virginia and Kentucky, were *naturally* the first to suffer from this southward movement.” Climate and soil, according to the *Evening Post*, were the cause of the migration. It was due, in part, to “the natural tendency of the negro race towards the tropics,” and in part to the better wages offered in the fertile bottom lands compared to the “overworked and wornout [sic] northern soil.”58 Meanwhile, a New Orleans editor noted a related movement of the white population out of the lower South. Virginia, the editor claimed, expected to receive a considerable amount of white immigration from “South Carolinians, who are anxious to put themselves beyond the sweep of the dark, portentous shadow of impending negro supremacy.” This movement made sense, according to the article, for white South Carolinians would find in Virginia “sympathetic public opinion, [and] a soil and climate” suitable for them.59 The relative shifts in population were underscoring, and heightening, the South’s regional differences.

The Richmond *Whig* initially supported the shifting geography and demography of race in the South. Commenting on black migration from the state in 1870, the *Whig*’s editor agreed that “The natural home of the black race is in hot climates. The temperature of those regions, so oppressive to the white race, is health and strength in their veins.” He argued that the climate of the lower South offered freedpeople “manifest advantages over their white competitors.” In line with the argument Powell Clayton used to support the idea of black immigration to Arkansas, the *Whig*’s editor concluded, “Those who go to a country which cannot be developed without their

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labor have our best wishes.”60 About a week later, the same paper carried an article laying out the advantages of Virginia to white immigrants and encouraging efforts to induce immigration. In contrast to the southern states whose development, according to the Whig, required black labor, Virginia’s needed white northerners or Europeans. The article held out Virginia’s climate (“where the winter is not severe”) and access to markets, as “attractions to the emigrant and farmer.” Of course, the article acknowledged, those who come would have to work to improve the soil, but it insisted that “in the scale of fertility the State of Virginia is ascending.”61

The change in demographics that the Whig foresaw and encouraged would require a fundamental change to the state’s economy. Though the migration of freedpeople followed the same general trend as the internal slave trade, such population flows could no longer mask the diverging fortunes of the upper and lower Souths. Compounding the labor issues associated with migration, the Whig suggested, only the “best hands” would go south, leaving Virginian planters with “the more infirm and the women and children.” Thus, as freedpeople left Virginia, they highlighted the state’s inability to compete with the gulf states for cotton production and indicated the demographic and geographic legacy of the slave trade.62 The “high price of cotton” and the “natural tendency of the colored race to gravitate towards warmer climates…” caused

60 Richmond Whig, April 4, 1870, p. 4; for Powell Clayton’s use of the idea that black labor was necessary for the development of Arkansas’s resources, see chap. 2, p. 74.
61 Richmond Whig, April 12, 1870, p. 4.
62 There is perhaps more here worthy of additional study. The pull of labor toward the southwest in the era of Reconstruction perpetuated the same patterns of migration, with their connected demographic dimensions, as had the internal slave trade, which is to say, young and healthy freedpeople were the most sought-after laborers and perhaps the most likely to make engage in migration. The fears of Virginia’s planters, that their most vigorous workers may strike out for better wages elsewhere, were not unfounded. A newspaper correspondent traveling through North Carolina in 1865, for instance, noted that the freedpeople he observed were primarily “children, or non-supporting population” because “Slavery was never a paying institution in North Carolina, no more than Virginia; but the raising of slaves for the man market was a great source of income to the planters. Consequently there are now on every plantation a cabin full of children clinging to the torn frock of some poor husbandless woman, and she must work for their support.” The correspondent met a planter who used to have thirty enslaved people but now could employ only “two women, one of them with a large family.” The rest had left the plantation with emancipation. New York Tribune, Aug. 2, 1865, p. 1.
serious apprehensions to be felt in some neighborhoods lest there should be a scarcity of labor for the present crop,” the Whig warned in September 1870. But it offered a solution in keeping with the emerging racial geography of emancipation: a change in the system of agriculture. “The change to crops which require less labor and the introduction of labor-saving implements will remedy the evil to some extent.”

Plans to attract white immigration were again wedded with ideas of abandoning cotton in favor of other crops in the upper South.

The Whig’s discussion of freedpeople’s emigration and the prospects of white immigration were mostly confined to the state’s borders. The Whig sought to help direct Virginia’s postwar development. It did not dwell on the larger impact of the out-migration of the formerly enslaved population on other states and regions. But others did, and they discerned widespread and significant patterns.

The New York Tribune carried an article from a military officer who had been stationed in the lower South. The article drew attention to “noteworthy movements of the elements of population that have latterly been going on in the South.” The officer had discerned two migratory streams, one white, one black, and observed they were tending in different directions. White migrants, according to the article, were moving toward the trans-Mississippi West, raising the concern that “South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama would be depopulated of that element.” Conversely, and compounding the issue, the officer “observed that there is a very extensive movement of the colored population to the ‘black belt’….He says that the place of the whites departing from that region will be filled by the blacks who are moving in that direction.” For Tribune readers who had encountered Meeker’s articles only months prior, this article suggested migration was beginning to achieve Meeker’s geographic vision of black freedom. The article

63 Richmond Whig, Sept. 13, 1870, p. 2.
declared that, if this migration continued, “the negro will inhabit the ‘black belt,’ and control it.”

The article concluded by calling on the superintendent of the 1870 census to pay particular attention to movements of the population within the postwar South. Tellingly, when the article was picked up by the Cincinnati *Daily Inquirer* a few days later, the headline changed from the *Tribune*’s rather neutral “Migrations of the Southern Population” to the much more alarming “The Beginning of the End. Rapid Africanization of the Cotton States.”

As Meeker had suggested when appealing to white immigration into the upper South, the demographic trends emerging by 1870 were furthering the spatial differentiation of southern regions. A Republican-aligned paper debated the merits of northern immigration to the South and recommended those interested consider the upper South, “where capital and labor from the north both make a far better return than at the southwest.” This recommendation highlighted the emergence of consistent themes: the article noted that white immigration to the upper South was “facilitated by the large and steady migration of the freedmen from states like Virginia.” Moreover, it linked white immigration with a change in crops and a system of land reform in the upper South, arguing that white farmers from the North could restore the worn-out soils of old slave states because they were “used to a much closer and more economical system of cultivation and farm management.” These same farmers, however, were discouraged from the “planting and cultivation of the great staples of the south,” a phrase meant to encompass cotton and sugar. In other words, the article suggested white immigrants seek the upper South and develop a system of agriculture there based around small farms growing fruit and grain and raising livestock. And

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this envisioned population realignment was facilitated, in the article’s logic, by freedpeople leaving the upper South for the cotton and sugar growing regions of the lower South.\textsuperscript{66}

By the end of 1870, then, white commentators had constructed a set of ideas about the demography and geography of the South, which saw the upper South increasingly defined as a zone for white habitation and the lower South, particularly the prime cotton-producing lands, as a place for black habitation. The release of the 1870 census spurred discussion of this divergence and raised particular concerns, wrapped up in the term “Africanization,” about the future of the lower South; the census widely confirmed observations that freedpeople were migrating to the southwest, while white people were leaving the southwest. It seemed to many white observers that the new laws of emancipation and Reconstruction, which had granted freedpeople a civic presence, were combining with the old laws of climate and nature to make the lower South into an exclusive zone for black freedom. Many white observers found this fitting, given their ideas of race and environment, and they thought a spatial segregation of the races might solve lingering problems of emancipation.

Not everyone, however, endorsed freedpeople’s patterns of movement and the implicit fulfillment of Meeker’s (or Cox’s) vision. Some took issue with the potential outcomes of postwar black migration. These commentators saw the “Africanization of the Gulf States,” taken to its full extent, as the end of productive cotton agriculture in the South. In their interpretation of the demographic trends, migration was bringing a black demographic and political majority to the richest lands of the South. Climate was dictating black economic power and political autonomy, and thus migration seemed to hold as much power to remake the world as the various

\textsuperscript{66} North American and United States Gazette (Philadelphia), Aug. 13, 1870, p. 2. The Gazette was owned by Morton McMichael, who served as Republican mayor of Philadelphia from 1866 to 1869. In the antebellum period, the paper was a Whig organ but became a strong supporter of Lincoln and the Republican Party during the war.
federal Reconstruction laws. The climate that had justified enslavement, and the routes that had fed its growth, now seemed to hold an emancipatory potential beyond even the schemes of radical lawmakers. Some encouraged the movement, seeing migration and climate as ways to secure black freedom, while others decried it. But whether in support or opposition, commentators agreed that migration could forever change the South’s racial geography.

Armed with census data, newspapers north and south kept up a steady stream of articles reporting on the migration of freedpeople in 1871 and 1872. For northern commentators, the census confirmed two important demographic points. First, some had held a belief, reinforced by proslavery arguments, that emancipation would lead to widespread mortality among formerly enslaved people. The census returns largely quieted those concerns. Second, northerners had worried that emancipation would result in widespread black migration to the North. Again, the census data showed otherwise. The Springfield Weekly Republican, for instance, reported that the “not quite complete” census showed “no reason to suppose that our colored race would not hold its own,” but qualified that this was true “provided it confines itself mainly to the southern portions of the country.” Having implied that black freedom belonged in the South, the Republican argued that, by concentrating themselves “in the cotton growing and semi-tropical states of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, Texas and Florida,” freedpeople would “become prosperous and highly civilized.”

The editor of the Boston Journal agreed. “The old cry that was raised about the time of emancipation, that the negro would die off like the Indian and soon disappear, is not exactly echoed in the last census.” Noting a general movement of freedpeople from the upper South

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toward the southwest, the *Journal* suggested “it is plain that the movement has been the natural one for the race toward a warmer climate and the more congenial and lucrative business of cotton planting.” Like the *Weekly Republican*, the *Boston Journal* supported this migration toward the cotton region. “[W]e must acknowledge the unconquerable vitality of the negro race,” wrote the editor. In the cotton South, the freedman “will have his full share in the progress and prosperity of the country.”

These editorials saw migration as an integral part of a well-functioning cotton economy: freedpeople were seeking the employment and wages available in the fertile lands of the Southwest, and by moving there to take part in this important agricultural sector, formerly enslaved people would secure their place as free laborers. Neither of these editorials dwelled on the relationship between or the implications of black in-migration and white out-migration. As the census data began to circulate more widely in later 1871, however, commentators took more detailed notice of how demographics were changing the geography of crop and race in the postwar South. The migratory patterns they saw developing gave rise to a potentially troubling conundrum: if certain crops required black labor, and certain climates were best suited to black life, what was to stop freedpeople from controlling those crops and climatic regions now that the constraint of slavery was lifted?

A long article in the *North American and United States Gazette* explained the issue in September 1871. “We thus see that the abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of the freedmen has caused a general movement of the colored race southward toward the Gulf States, where labor is in demand…and where the African feels more at home than in the colder climates of the border and northern States,” the article began. This movement had been a boon for

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southwestern cotton planters, and the editor had “little doubt” whether migration accounted for the “rapid recovery of the cotton crop in the south.” Meanwhile, as freedpeople left the upper South, white immigrants were taking their place “and are now pouring down through Kentucky and Tennessee, and through Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia.” These two streams of migration would, on the one hand, concentrate cotton production in the Southwest, and, on the other hand, open the upper South to a focus on grains, fruits, and livestock. “There are no crops raised in these border states that cannot just as well be raised by white labor,” according to the Gazette’s editor. In general, this re-ordering of the geography of crop and labor was to be encouraged, as it brought demographics and agricultural practice in line with regional environments.69

But the article also presented a warning to southern planters and the so-called “reactionary movement.” The high wages offered by planters to induce migration, coupled with the activities of the Ku Klux Klan and related violence, might lead to a dangerous demographic concentration in the lower South. Freedpeople fleeing from “terrorism in Georgia and Alabama,” the article continued, were gathering in Florida, where “population is so scarce and land so superabundant that a large migration of blacks thither might easily become established as owners and tillers of the soil, and obtain control of affairs.” With climate in their favor, freedpeople would make Florida “as productive, as wealthy, and as populous as Cuba.” Yet Florida was only one state at risk. “If the reactionary movement should not be arrested,” the Gazette predicted, “it seems clear that South Carolina, Florida, and Mississippi will centralize the race, and become entirely Africanized. Hence the independent southern gentleman can make his choice.” Attempt to overthrow Reconstruction, cautioned the Gazette, and the result would be to create black states in the lower South.70

The Richmond *Whig* picked up the theme days later, carrying the argument forward to suggest that black migration to the Gulf states might give rise to an even greater catastrophe if it went so far as to produce a new secessionist movement among freedpeople. “The tendency of this class of population is to migration to the cotton States, and the ultimate Africanization of that whole region is among the possibilities.” Quoting the Louisville *Ledger*, the article questioned, “When ten million of negroes are congregated in the South, with control of ten or more State governments, shall we not have a more dangerous and intractable sectionalism than we ever had before?” Migration, the *Whig* and *Ledger* worried, “will give birth to schemes for a separate government…. [and] they will some day find the way to a separate nationality.”

Balancing the calculus of growing black political power against the demonstrated potential for the world-making power of migration and demography, the *Whig* editor concluded southern Democrats needed to welcome freedpeople as allies. “It is better to have them as friends than enemies… as Virginia Conservatives than as followers of the carpet-bag plunderers.”

In response to the political threat of black migration, the *Whig* agreed with the *Gazette* and urged moderation among southern conservatives.

Still, the migration continued, and fears of Africanization grew. The *Gazette* checked back in on black migration to Florida in spring 1872. Again blaming “Kuklux operations in Georgia and Alabama,” the *Gazette* noted the movement of freedpeople toward Florida (“tending irresistibly toward the tropics”). It hoped to unite this flow of labor with northern capital and immigration from abroad, to develop Florida into a zone for the production of tropical produce, namely sugar and coffee.

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A couple of months later, the *Gazette* lashed out at an editorial in the New Orleans *Bee*, which it credited as portraying the “conservative view.” The *Bee* had raised the alarm that, if black voters carried the upcoming elections, Louisiana would stand poised to receive “a vast immigration of colored people, invited not only by fertile lands and a congenial climate, but by a black administration and general colored ascendency. Louisiana would thus become the Canaan of all the negroes of Missouri, Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina and Tennessee.”

The *Bee* further warned that such a movement of freedpeople would result in “a reverse effect…upon our white population.” The *Gazette* agreed with the *Bee*’s logic but, rather than seeing an outcome to be vigorously resisted, found it a fitting and proper state of affairs for Louisiana. The southern environment, according to the *Gazette*, had produced appropriate and entirely logical spaces for black freedom:

> In the deadly climate of Louisiana the white race of the north and of Europe is decimated and wasted away, while the black man flourishes. Nature is in his favor there and yet the Times and the Bee fancy that they can ignore nature and overturn the preponderance of race established by her laws. As the colored man thrives in the rice swamps and Sea Island cotton districts of South Carolina, where even the white native planter never could live all the year round, so he thrives in similar districts in Louisiana.⁷³

To the dismay of southern conservatives, the *Gazette* made clear the logic of climate and migration: even in the absence of an official scheme like that of Cox, the lower South may inevitably be destined to become an exclusive zone of black freedom.

Indeed, building off an article published in the *Nation* on June 27, 1872, the editor of the *Gazette* developed a coherent racial geographical vision of the postwar South. Like Meeker, the *Gazette*’s writer considered the climate, disease environment, and agriculture in portions of the South and endorsed “Africanization” as a proper course for black freedom in the South. The referenced *Nation* article discussed the problems facing the resumption of profitable rice

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production in the South Carolina low country, and though most of the article focused on problems of labor and the unique demands of rice cultivation, it mentioned the “deadly fever” common in the low country. The Nation’s correspondent, in keeping with racialized ideas of disease, reported that “what is destruction to the white man has not the slightest effect upon the negro.” But where the Nation saw obstacles to southern agriculture, the Gazette saw opportunities for freedpeople. Citing the geography of health in South Carolina and likening it to Louisiana, the Gazette questioned the logic of resistance to demographic concentration, asking

Now under such circumstances what sense is there in the prejudice against Africanization? Does not the climate clearly indicate this region as the home of the American colored race? And if they have to raise the great staples that have so long given value to these districts, what sense is there in seeking to prevent these people becoming the ruling race there and managing affairs to suit themselves?...Africanization, then, though an ugly term to read, means nothing more than that where the white race cannot live, by means of the climate, the colored race be given control, and left to fill all grades of service.

Like Meeker, the Gazette called for education and uplift among the freedpeople, but also for a spatially bound freedom. Climate and crop, in the logic of migration and Africanization, would constrain black freedom to the cotton region of the lower South, where freedpeople would be able to own land and practice local self-government.

The Gazette, a prominent Republican newspaper, was not the only major source to endorse the migration of freedpeople to the cotton region in 1872. Meeker’s friend and boss, Horace Greeley, also indicated his support for black freedom in the lower South. In a speech in Poughkeepsie, New York, Greeley predicted “that the colored people of this country will naturally gravitate toward that portion which lies nearest the tropics; that fifty years hence that race will be found relatively less numerous in Maryland and Virginia than they are now, and relatively more numerous in Florida, Louisiana and probably in Texas than they are now.”

75 North American and United States Gazette, July 8, 1872, p. 2.
Greeley used these points to argue that freedpeople and their children will remain an important portion of the U.S. population, and so should be educated and treated as citizens. But, noting the “tendency of the colored race toward the tropical sun,” Greeley also posited continuing segregation, arguing that “African people in our country will remain for an indefinite period a peculiar people.” For Greeley, running on the Liberal Republican ticket, discussing black migration and the South’s racial geography was a way to suggest political moderation: he simultaneously marked freedpeople as racially distinct and as integral members of the U.S. population, and so suggested a program of political equality with social and institutional separation. Greeley’s use of racial geography was decidedly less radical than Meeker’s, but importantly, while exhorting white Americans to go west, Greeley encouraged black Americans to seek the southern tropics.76

Regardless of whether migration and racial concentration were proposed as part of moderate or radical schemes of reconstruction, few in the upper South states welcomed the out-migration of freedpeople and their concentration in the cotton South. The Richmond Whig responded to the Gazette in June 1872, labeling the Gazette’s racial geography akin to “penning up the negroes in the gulf states.” The Whig suggested that the Gazette “wants to put all the negroes to making tobacco, rice, sugar and cotton” and “shows very plainly that it regards them fit for nothing else.” Such a spatially bound freedom, the Whig countered, would serve only to perpetuate racial distinctions. Instead, the Whig wanted to retain Virginia’s black population and to forestall its migration elsewhere. “We protest against this scheme for the Africanization of the Gulf States. Virginia, for one, cannot spare her colored labor.” Of course, the Whig’s logic was also one of spatially and economically curtailing black freedom, for rather than see freedpeople

76 Horace Greeley, “The Colored Race,” May 16, 1872, Horace Greeley papers, Box 6, Library of Congress; see also Richmond Whig, May 21, 1872, p. 4.
migrate to the lower South, the Whig wanted them to stay and “supply the bulk of the agricultural labor” in Virginia.77 While Virginia and other upper South states looked to ideas of white immigration and agricultural reform to restore their land and labor in the aftermath of emancipation, they moved only haltingly toward efforts to encourage such immigration.78 Even in the upper South, the racial geography of southern environments and crops remained contested in the era of Reconstruction as the out-migration of freedpeople compounded labor problems.

Georgia, containing some regions more like the upper South and other regions more like the lower South, underwent a period of geographical uncertainty as it adjusted to black migration and the shifting racial geography in the early 1870s. Georgia newspapers carried scattered calls to encourage the immigration of white northerners and Europeans in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Such ideas usually pointed to the difficulty of postwar labor relations and made an appeal to the suitability of Georgia’s climate for white settlement. But even many of these articles were reprints by the Georgia press, rather than true homegrown efforts to encourage immigration. Instead, Georgia planters began to take notice of the emigration of freedpeople from their state and to find it a cause for distress. The shifting racial geography, in other words, was not a welcomed development.

A concerned Georgian wrote to the Macon Weekly Telegraph and Messenger in early 1873, noting the migration of freedpeople from Georgia to the Southwest. He suggested “that our people should do all in their power to resist this effort…to move a large portion of the colored people from among us.” He called on the press to advertise the “dangers and toils” freedpeople would face in “the malarious swamps of the Mississippi Valley.” His concern, however, was the

77 Richmond Whig, June 21, 1872, p. 4.
78 Ziegler-McPherson, Selling America, chap. 7.
loss of labor for Georgia’s planters, not the health of the freedpeople. Later that month, the editor of the *Telegraph and Messenger* offered his own solution to the problem. Foreseeing a future where freedpeople would “steadily gravitate towards those regions of Central America where the thermal and social conditions are better suited to them,” the editor called on white labor to take their place. “There is no spot on earth better fitted for white agricultural labor than Georgia—where the climate is so mild.” Freedpeople’s movements forced Georgians to consider the geography of race and labor in their state and to begin to advance ideas and measures to counter what they viewed as deleterious trends.

By April 1873, as black emigration continued to confront Georgia planters, the state’s agricultural society issued a call for information regarding freedpeople’s migrations. In planning for the September meeting, the society appointed a committee of five to “consider and report…the best plan for preventing colored emigration from the state.” The committee thus asked, “Will not planters, as a class, give us the result of their experience and reasoning on the subject? Will not some officer of the railroads take a leisure moment and arrange for us such information as…how many negro laborers have gone out of Georgia on their lines?” Despite some rumblings about increasing efforts for attracting white immigration and reforming agriculture in the state, Georgia planters aimed to retain their black laborers.

When it met five months later, the Georgia State Agricultural Society devoted lengthy coverage to the issue of freedpeople’s emigration from the state. The discussion took two forms. First the report of the five-member “committee on negro emigration” attempted to provide a reassuring assessment of the situation. The committee surveyed railroad companies operating in

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81 *Macon Weekly Telegraph and Messenger*, April 15, 1873.
Georgia and discovered that, of the three lines questioned, 7,145 “emigrant tickets” had been sold. They estimated an additional 1,000 who might have left Georgia via steamboat or private conveyance, giving a total estimate of 8,145 emigrants—white and black—from Georgia for the twelve months between April 1, 1872, and April 1, 1873. The committee further estimated that 5,000 of these emigrants were freedpeople, and, after taking women and children into account, the committee decided that probably only 2,000 able field hands had left the state during those twelve months. These laborers, according to the committee, would have accounted for about 6,000 to 7,000 bales of cotton, “quite an item to the State.” Yet despite this calculation of labor lost to migration, the committee argued that no apparent results of this emigration were observable: plantations carried on, and even the regions supposedly hit hardest by this movement were not seeing diminished production. The committee concluded that there was little need, based on its estimates, to discuss how to prevent such emigration.82

The brief and positive report was not the end of the discussion about black emigration, however. The committee also recommended consideration of, and attached to the proceedings, an essay outlining ideas of race, labor, crop, and place, and making an argument against black migration from the state while working hard to inscribe black labor as necessary for cotton growing. The essay, written by William McKinley, a planter from Baldwin County, Georgia, worked with the same logic of racial geography that others suggested would lead to autonomy among freedpeople in the cotton regions of the lower South. Yet, instead of finding emigration and demographic concentration inevitable, it suggested ways to keep black labor in place,

82 Proceedings of the Georgia State Agricultural Society, in Convention, at Athens, Georgia, August 12th, 13th, and 14th, 1873 (Atlanta, 1873), pp. 7-8. Ina Dillard Russell Library Special Collections, Georgia College. I am indebted to Holly Croft, digital archivist, for providing me with a high-quality scan of this document.
subordinate, and working in the favor of white capital. McKinley worked from the premise that cotton agriculture required black labor, and that Georgia would be ruined without cotton and freedpeople. Addressing the assembled planters, McKinley argued that “our lands lie under a blazing sun, and our cotton-picking season…is loaded with bad air, with fever and congestive chill, and death for white laborers….Speaking only for the cotton country, I contemplate black labor alone for the main crop of cotton. All the cotton produced by white labor is, and ever will be, a mere ‘drop in the bucket.’” Operating within the logic of antebellum proslavery racial theory, McKinley argued that southern crops and climates required black labor.

Those same crops and climates, also, he argued, dictated large land holdings in cotton regions. Neither white immigration nor agricultural reform, according to McKinley, fit with the environment of Georgia. To make this point, he contrasted Georgia with the upper South: “among the clover and grain fields, and the orchards and potato patches…where white labor is not a failure,” small farms were possible, but in the “hot, malarial, cotton country, where white labor in cotton culture is a failure,” land reform would destroy agriculture. Here we see the web of ideas that supported concepts of racial geography: the southern environment was suited for cotton, which required large landholdings. The demands of the crop and climate, moreover, required black labor. Pursue plans of white immigration, McKinley declared, and Georgia’s cotton culture will cease.

But having defined Georgia’s future as a cotton state, McKinley had to address the relative profitability of planting, which was drawing freedpeople to the Southwest where land

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83 Though it was titled “Address by Col. William M’Kinley, of Baldwin,” it is unclear from the committee’s report whether the essay was delivered orally or circulated in written form at the convention. For consistency, I refer to it as an essay, and I’ve modernized the spelling of M’Kinley’s name to “McKinley,” which is how he is referred to in the committee’s report.

84 *Proceedings of the Georgia State Agricultural Society*, p. 35.

85 *Proceedings of the Georgia State Agricultural Society*, pp. 34-5.
was more fertile and wages higher. He suggested a new labor system that would mitigate the threat of black migration. McKinley held that “the greatest and most pressing business of the South to-day, is to settle the negroes.” “Land is immovable, and a fixed quantity,” he posited, “so should labor be fixed, certain, and plentiful.” To that end, McKinley suggested a system of long-term land tenure, rather than day labor or yearly contracts. He envisioned a contract system that would tie black labor to white-owned land for periods of “five, ten, fourteen years, or for life…by this the landholders will have a fixed, abundant supply of labor always at home.”\textsuperscript{86} Such a system, in his estimation, would be “better than slavery—better than emigrant German labor.”

Perceiving freedpeople’s ability to change place as the primary threat to the future of cotton agriculture in Georgia, McKinley sought to bind freedpeople to particular properties and planters. Only by retaining its black labor could Georgia compete with the southwestern cotton region, but in McKinley’s reading of the racial geography, retain that labor Georgia must, for its environment mediated against programs of white immigration. Rather than a zone for black freedom, McKinley wanted the southern environment to ensure white profit from racial capitalism. “Eight hundred years! and our sons still cotton planters—still masters of the South, and their cotton fields full, from age to age, of happy, well-settled and well-regulated free negroes,” he concluded.\textsuperscript{87}

McKinley’s ideas were never acted upon. Freedpeople continued to leave Georgia throughout the 1870s and 1880s, and commentators continued to consider where Georgia fit in the postwar racial geography. Charles Nordhoff, a correspondent for the New York Herald who toured the South in 1875, estimated that twenty-five thousand freedpeople had left Georgia since the late 1860s, but he thought this was good for Georgia because “It will make room for white

\textsuperscript{86} Proceedings of the Georgia State Agricultural Society, p. 37, emph. in original.

\textsuperscript{87} Proceedings of the Georgia State Agricultural Society, pp. 37-40.
emigrants.” Nordhoff contended that “Georgia is peculiarly fitted to receive and utilize a white farming and manufacturing population. It is not properly a planting, but a manufacturing state.”

At least some native Georgians agreed, and the legislature directed the commissioner of agriculture to advertise the state in hopes of attracting white immigration. These efforts led to pro-immigration publications in 1878 and 1879. In keeping with the ideas of climate related to race and immigration, both publications defined Georgia’s climate as within the “temperate zone, and, as a consequence…exempt alike from the rigors and other discomforts and disadvantages of a cold climate, and the debility and diseases incident to tropical regions.” Contra McKinley, those who desired white immigration in Georgia had to posit that its climate was not a hinderance to white settlement. The out-migration of freedpeople suggested a shift in the economy of the state, leading advocates of white immigration to support a shift in the South’s racial geography, which was increasingly defined by the presence (or lack) of cotton and freedpeople. Georgia, stuck from a climatic and topographical perspective between the upper and lower Souths, became a place of uncertain demography and agriculture in the 1870s.

Freedpeople’s migrations kept the demographic and agricultural future of the lower South uncertain, too. But there, rather than attempt to stop black immigration, white politicians considered ways to redraw the political geography of the postwar South to resist the emerging racial geography. If the cotton regions were to become “Africanized,” perhaps those regions should be severed from up-country areas better suited, in popular thought, for white settlement. As with the reaction of the agricultural society in Georgia, ideas regarding shifting state borders in the lower South came to a head in 1873. Three separate movements emerged: Alabama

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considered annexing part of west Florida; Texas considered annexing part of west Louisiana; and a group of reactionaries in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Mississippi considered plans to create a new state. Of these movements, the third, the so-called “state of Jackson,” was expressly in response to black migration into the southwest cotton regions. The other two were interpreted by white commentators as likewise connected to black migration and the shifting demographics of the South.

The timing of these three geographical realignment movements, in 1873, makes sense. That same year, black men became the commissioners of immigration in both Mississippi and Arkansas. As discussed in chapter two, William H. Grey’s appointment was opposed by those who thought he would succeed in attracting only black migrants to Arkansas. At least one commentator suggested that Grey used the same logic of climate and crop to encourage freedpeople to migrate, reporting that Grey “insists that the lowlands and cotton and sugar plantations of the valley of the Mississippi constitute the negro’s paradise; that there their labor finds its greatest reward; that their peculiar physical and mental organization, especially adapts them to the climatic laws of this great valley, and that ultimately there will come a more or less perfect segregation begotten by laws of climate and physical peculiarities of the white and black races.”

No evidence beyond this letter to an editor suggests Grey did, in fact, encourage a segregation of the races based on climate and crop, though he did argue that Arkansas offered both upland areas for white settlement and lowland areas for black settlement. Either way, his appointment, along with that of Richard Griggs as the immigration commissioner of Mississippi, likely helped spur the movement to create the state of Jackson in the summer of 1873; this

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91 See chapter 2, pp. 15-20.
movement was the most dramatic and far reaching of the proposals to redraw political borders in the Reconstruction South. The state of Jackson movement drew momentum from similar ideas, though the other two movements focused on annexation rather than new state creation. To observers, however, all three appeared as part of a whole—a movement to shift the political boundaries of the South in response to patterns of population redistribution in order to carve out and preserve distinct geographic areas in which white southerners would retain political control.

In the late 1860s, the states of Alabama and Florida considered redrawning their shared border. Alabama was to annex the portion of Florida west of the Apalachicola River, which would expand Alabama’s coastline and give it Pensacola as a deep-water commercial port. The proposal was considered by voters and legislators in both states and generally favored though tabled for the time when it lost support from the governor of Florida. The annexation became an issue again in 1873, when both houses of the Alabama legislature passed measures to enact the annexation. Beyond passing the congress, however, the matter was dropped because it lacked voter support in both states. In its original 1869 plan and its renewed 1873 form, the annexation of west Florida to Alabama was presented primarily as an economic restructuring of the states, but it was also based on an appeal to geography and population. In 1873, proponents understood the scheme’s revival as connected to migratory trends. The Macon, Georgia, Weekly Telegraph,

92 For appointment of Griggs, see Canton, Mississippi American Citizen, April 19, 1873, p. 3. I have yet to find similar reaction to the appointment of Griggs, though his political opponents contested his election on constitutional grounds (Griggs was, at the time of his appointment to commissioner of immigration, already serving as a state representative). The Mississippi attorney general attempted to have Griggs removed from office, but a judge dismissed the case and allowed Griggs to serve his term. See Magnolia (Mississippi) Gazette, June 20, 1873; Jackson, Mississippi Weekly Clarion, June 12, 1873, p. 2.
93 Francis G. Caffey, “The Annexation of West Florida to Alabama,” Proceedings of the Twenty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Alabama State Bar Association (Montgomery, Ala., 1901), pp. 108-33; Hugh C. Bailey, “Alabama and West Florida Annexation,” Journal of Florida History 35.3 (1957), pp. 219-32; A brief article in early 1874 supported the idea that migration was shifting the demographics of Alabama, suggesting that Mississippi authorities had noticed a “that the removal of negroes from Alabama to [Mississippi] continues….Alabama…is steadily gaining ground, and will probably soon be under white control.” Dallas Weekly Herald, March 28, 1874, p. 1.
for instance, supported the movement by suggesting that Florida stood “a chance of permanent Africanization,” while Alabama’s demographic and political situation was, in the *Weekly Telegraph’s* opinion, improving. Sensing the shifting prospects of the states, the *Weekly Telegraph* determined “the odds are in favor with Alabama, and so we should vote, if a citizen of West Florida.” A similar movement considered the annexation of two west Louisiana parishes (Caddo and De Soto) to Texas in 1873, and was supported by the Texas Democratic Convention because “those parishes are identified, politically and otherwise, with the State of Texas.” Again, nothing became of the plan, but it suggested to observers that state borders might change in response to demographic trends.

While others considered annexation or fretted about the impact of Grey and Griggs, a group in Tennessee, led by Kenneth Rayner, contemplated the creation of a new state out of portions of western Tennessee, northern Mississippi, and southern Kentucky. The proposed state, tentatively called the state of Jackson, was a response to black immigration into the southern portion of Mississippi, igniting fears of potential long-term political control of the state by the black population. Tennessee and Kentucky were repeatedly identified—in antebellum and postwar sources—as white spaces, and this new state movement aimed to “redeem” northern Mississippi by uniting it with those spaces. Since people had long been paying attention to freedpeople’s migrations in the South, the scheme garnered national attention in the spring and summer of 1873.

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95 Apparently, the parishes of Caddo and De Soto, Louisiana, applied for annexation to Texas in 1873. The Texas Democratic Convention endorsed the movement, but the state of Louisiana refused the proposal. A Shreveport, Louisiana, historian noted the annexation idea was an attempt to “alleviate the sufferings under Republican rule and negro troubles.” Maude Hearn O’Pry, *Chronicles of Shreveport* (Shreveport, La., 1928), p. 148. *Minutes of the Democratic State Convention of the State of Texas: Held at the City of Austin, September 3d, 4th, and 5th, 1873* (Austin, 1873), pp. 27-8.
The movement began tentatively. In March the Memphis *Daily Appeal* carried an article discussing, in general terms, ideas of creating new states out of eastern and western portions of Tennessee. The idea, according to the *Appeal*, “excites a deal of interest throughout Western Tennessee and the northern counties of Mississippi. These counties have a large white and sparse negro population, and the purpose of the white people to organize this new State grows out of the tendency to segregation which everywhere characterizes the migratory movements of whites and negroes.” The scheme grew over the coming months, and by early July, plans were in place to hold a convention, with delegates from the three states involved, to consider how to proceed. The emergence of Rayner as a leader of the movement raised the profile of the state of Jackson from reactionary oddity to more serious consideration.

Rayner had made his name in antebellum North Carolina, though, according to historian Gregg Cantrell, he consistently stood at odds with mainstream antebellum southern politics. Though he was a slaveholder, he never endorsed slavery as a positive good, and he consistently opposed southern Democrats. Rayner worked his way up in North Carolina politics in the 1840s, eventually serving as a national congressman, but he did so as a Whig and, after 1854, as a Know Nothing. He was initially a Unionist, then endorsed secession, then attempted to negotiate a separate peace for North Carolina during the war. After the war, Rayner wrote a biography of Andrew Johnson, defending his plans for reconstruction, and aligned himself with moderate Republicans. Rayner also, around this time, considered the geography of freedom in the postwar South.  

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96 Memphis *Daily Appeal*, March 2, 1873, p. 2. See also *Hinds County Gazette*, March 12, 1873.
97 A through political biography of Kenneth Rayner is found in Gregg Cantrell, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent* (Urbana and Chicago, 1993).
In a letter to the *New York Times* in October 1865, Rayner argued that southern “public opinion is unanimous in favor of the separation of the white and black races….the two races cannot co-exist in the same country where there is anything like the same approximation to equality in numbers as there is in the South. The good of both races requires their separation.” Unlike Cox, who suggested his plan of separation around the same time, however, Rayner wanted to preserve the South as a white space. Rayner “hoped the Central Government will immediately turn its attention to this question of colonization.” If a scheme to remove freedpeople from the South could be carried out, Rayner predicted that “a heavy immigration would pour down here from the North and from Europe.” In the political and demographic fluidity of emancipation, Rayner hoped to secure the South for white immigration. By the time Rayner made these suggestions, interest in colonization had waned, as had his political influence. Stymied in North Carolina’s postwar politics, Rayner sold his landholdings in North Carolina and moved to Mississippi by 1866, where he had acquired 3,400 acres in Coahoma County (though he appears to have set up his household in Memphis). During this period, Rayner focused on planting and stayed out of politics, but his ideas of securing at least portions of the South for white immigration must have lingered, for he threw his support behind the state of Jackson movement in 1873. That July he served as president of the convention to discuss and plan the movement, and he became the primary spokesperson for the new state.

From its scattered and tenuous beginnings, the new state movement began receiving regular coverage in the Tennessee press by mid-July 1873. By then, a call had been issued for a convention, to be held at Jackson, Tennessee (the proposed capital), and counties in the interested portions of Tennessee, Mississippi, and Kentucky were busy selecting delegates for

the convention. The Memphis *Appeal*, Jackson *Whig and Tribune*, and Bolivar (Mississippi) *Bulletin* reported favorably on local meetings and endorsed the upcoming convention.99 Supporters of the movement praised the proposed state’s homogeneity of population and economic foundation, and they readily admitted that the new state was a response to black migration into the lower South cotton regions. The Richmond *Whig*, for instance, labeled the state as a reaction to “negro pressure” and suggested that “the same principle of segregation would lead to a change in the structure of the commonwealths of Alabama, Florida and Louisiana. It would result in giving up forever to the negroes the finest portion of the south and establishing pure black commonwealths.”100 Others, thinking that migration would inevitably produce black states in the South, recognized that a new, majority white state would help re-balance representation at the federal level.101

By the time the convention met in late July, the leaders of the movement had already identified a list of counties to be included in the new state and had commissioned a map of the state, which, according to supporters, “shows a compact, symmetrical sovereignty, well proportioned and formed by nature for the home of a large population.”102 Support was not unanimous, however. The *Appeal*, which most consistently reported on the movement, gave it a mixed reception. The *Appeal* regularly re-printed articles from other area papers showing widespread support for the new state. But the day before the convention met, the *Appeal* published an editorial asking, “can we give up old Tennessee?” Arguing that what Tennessee most needed was a reprieve from political agitation, the *Appeal* advised caution in advancing the

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99 See Memphis *Daily Appeal*, July 13, 1873, p. 4, which carried clippings from the other named papers. Nothing in Rayner’s papers at the University of North Carolina refers to the state of Jackson movement, and the convention’s proceedings do not seem to exist outside of what was reported in newspapers.
100 Richmond *Whig*, quoted in Memphis *Daily Appeal*, July 25, 1873, p. 2.
movement and felt that the new state’s advocates had yet to lay out “convincing reasons in support of the proposition.”

Whether in support or not, the *Appeal* and other observers of the movement recognized its inherent racial basis. The proposed counties were mostly (though not all) majority white counties and profited primarily from non-cotton agriculture. In further describing the movement for its readers, the *Appeal* listed the proposed counties and showed their racial demographics. In general, the proposed landmass for the new state comprised upcountry counties, the sort that had long been differentiated from the low country as suitable for white settlement. And certainly, outside of the three involved states, the movement was generally recognized as an attempt to create a white state in reaction to demographic changes wrought by black migration. An article from the Wilmington, North Carolina, *Journal*, for instance, reported that “The movement finds its greatest impetus in the desire of the white people of North Mississippi to escape from the difficulties of negro domination. The rich lowlands of the lower Mississippi Valley are constantly receiving an increase of colored population from the older States of the South.” Citing the “probable continuance of this large and increasing migration of the colored race,” the *Journal* speculated that “The same principle of segregation, if it shall be carried out by the people of North Mississippi, will doubtless lead to radical changes in the States of Louisiana, Alabama and Florida.” Like the Richmond *Whig* before it, the *Journal* warned such movements would “surrender one of the finest and more fertile lands of the South to the possession of purely black commonwealths.”

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104 *Wilmington* (North Carolina) *Journal*, Aug. 1, 1873, p. 1. This article was reprinted as far away as California. See for instance *San Francisco Bulletin*, Aug. 8, 1873.
Map showing approximate borders of the proposed state of Jackson, 1873. Red dot shows location of Jackson, Tenn., the proposed capital. Shading indicates relative white vs black population, based on 1870 census data (blue is majority white, green is majority black). Credit: Social Explorer.

Indeed, the Cincinnati *Daily Gazette* recalled Cox’s internal colonization scheme while reporting on the state of Jackson. “This movement is to carry into effect a plan proposed by Gen. Cox while candidate for Governor. His idea was to set apart certain of the Gulf States for the blacks. It was pronounced impractical then, because there was no power existing so absolute as to clear out these States for the blacks, or to remove them thither.” But migration and
environment were proving more powerful than the postwar state. The Gazette continued, “the cross migration which government could not force may come about in time by natural causes.”

Those who recalled Cox’s plan saw the state of Jackson as its natural successor—a racial state defined by crop and climate.

The new state movement even received coverage in England, where it was linked with the Florida/Alabama and Louisiana/Texas movements and explained by reference to racial geographic thinking. The Pall Mall Budget, a London digest, reported that the movement was an effort at “resettlement of the boundaries by which the ‘white’ districts might be separated from those peopled chiefly by blacks.” Though the article denounced the movement, it also understood its logic, explaining that

in the Gulf States, with their semi-tropical climate…the white man may live indeed, but cannot work. Here it is that the energies of the African race find their true field for the exercise. The culture of rice along the swampy coast lands, or cotton and sugar in the alluvial soil of the Gulf States, will never be carried on upon anything like a large scale by men of European descent. Under the slave system in its later development the exhausted border States were chiefly used as breeding grounds for the supply of the labour market in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. And now the freed black population appear to be turning their faces of their own accord towards the shores of the Gulf of Mexico.

To those who contemplated the movement, even overseas, it seemed likely that Rayner might get his wish of carving a separate and distinct white region out of the postwar South. Rather than appearing as the work of white politicians, however, observers roundly interpreted the movement as a reaction to freedpeople’s postwar migrations. Black migration, in the summer of 1873, evoked a “cry for a reconstruction of the Southern map.”

Despite its seeming momentum, its planning, mapping, and two-day convention, the movement for the new state fell apart. Like the annexation movements in Alabama/Florida and

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105 Cincinnati Daily Gazette, Aug. 12, 1873, p. 4.
106 “Separatist Movements in America,” The Pall Mall Budget, Sept. 5, 1873, pp. 6-7.
Texas/Louisiana, the new state faced considerable political and constitutional hurdles. It would require the approval of voters, legislators, and governors of Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky, and ultimate approval by the federal government. The Appeal, the day after the convention adjourned, declared the effort a “failure,” and ridiculed it for having “labored like a mountain and brought forth a mouse.” The Appeal reported that, of the forty-three proposed counties, delegates from only twenty-three attended the convention, noting that Kentucky was especially underrepresented. A few days later the Appeal carried articles from the Savannah Morning News, the Chattanooga Times, the Louisville Courier-Journal, the St. Louis Globe, the Memphis Avalanche, and the Brownsville Bee, showing a “growing feeling against the multiplication of states,” the constitutional and political difficulties of creating a new state, and ultimately, “the absurdity of the thing.” By August 3, the Appeal considered the movement “defunct.”

Rayner, however, was not ready to give up. He wrote a letter to the Appeal defending the movement and committing himself to its continuance. Rayner argued that “whether in numbers, character, or extent of territory represented, [the convention] was anything but a ‘failure.’” He acknowledged some of the difficulties raised by the Appeal and explained the convention was only a first step, but that it had been successful in its modest aims. The next day, the Appeal’s editorial board responded to Rayner, writing that his letter presented “no reasons that can induce a change of mind in regard to what we have advertised as a ‘failure’ and a ‘dead subject.’” And indeed, the movement soon passed from notice, receiving only scattered and delayed

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111 Memphis Daily Appeal, Aug. 7, 1873, p. 2.
112 Memphis Daily Appeal, Aug. 8, 1873, p. 1.
coverage in late August and into September 1873. The proposed second convention, to be held in Memphis, never met. It seems likely the Panic of 1873 helped distract from the idea of creating a new state. And by 1874, eager for a worthwhile political position, Rayner had busied himself seeking an appointment to the Alabama Claims Commission.\footnote{Cantrell, \textit{Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent}, pp. 158-160.}

Those disruptions might not have obviated a revival of interest in the movement, but the 1874 elections in Mississippi probably did. That year, Mississippi returned to Democratic control, proving to concerned white conservatives that even so-called “Africanized” states could be held firmly under white control when violence was used to intimidate black voters.\footnote{James C. Cobb, \textit{The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity} (New York and Oxford, 1993), pp. 63-68}

Migration into the cotton states continued in the following years, but as Reconstruction was reversed at the state and then, in 1877, at the federal level, explicit concern about black migration into the lower South abated. Democratic Redemption and the curtailment of black political power demonstrated that a black population in the cotton regions did not portend black political domination of those regions. Redemption, the end of formal Reconstruction efforts, broke the link between the South’s racial geography and its political geography. By the mid-1870s, then, political developments in the postwar South reduced anxiety about “Africanization,” and, though freedpeople continued to migrate within and beyond the South, the racial geography of the South hardened. It hardened in the interests of agricultural capitalists, not in the interest of freedpeople.

By the late 1870s and into the 1880s, schemes to create exclusive territories for black freedom turned to other portions of the United States, primarily spaces in the West or Midwest, where existing white populations and infrastructures were sparse. In the years immediately following emancipation, there was at least some chance that official, government-sponsored plans
like that of Cox to create black states in the lower South, or like Rayner’s to remove the black population entirely, might come to pass. Such plans would have radically reconfigured demographic, agricultural, and political geographies of the postwar United States. Then, for about a decade after emancipation, and especially during the high years of radical Reconstruction, it appeared to many white observers that freedpeople’s migrations within the South would achieve the same end through less forceful or coercive means—forever shifting the geography of race and freedom in the era of emancipation. But though free migration persisted, and did indeed change freedpeople’s worlds, it did not redraw the political map of the United States.

Instead, by reflecting and amplifying previously existing racist theories regarding place and labor, black migration to the lower South perpetuated racialized cotton agriculture in the Reconstruction era. Black freedom of movement was interpreted by postwar commentators as evidence of a racial geographic destiny because, as long as black people moved toward “tropical regions,” free black migration bolstered racial theories of difference. By the late 1870s, white politicians and planters again presided over the South economically and politically. And though the social and cultural divergence of the upper and lower Souths continued, freedpeople remained locked into patterns of agricultural production that many white planters and policy makers still thought required black labor not only for their success but for their very existence.115

Violence and de facto disenfranchisement—the so-called Mississippi Plan—kept black political power attenuated between the mid-1870s and the late 1880s. By 1890, amid a resurgence of black immigration, Mississippi conservatives introduced a new weapon in the arsenal of white

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115 Gilbert Fite, for instance, points out that by 1880, the “black belt” had the highest proportion of black population and of tenant farmers in the South, while the upland regions of the South, where cotton did not grow as well, had higher percentages of white population and farm ownership; sharecropping, cotton production, and population had become increasingly spatially segregated, and cotton growing by black sharecroppers had become increasingly concentrated in the lower South. Gilbert C. Fite, Cotton Fields no More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980 (Lexington, Ky., 1984), p. 5.
supremacy: de jure disenfranchisement through poll taxes and literacy tests. As historian James C. Cobb notes, white planters continued to want a large black labor force but feared the “flood” of migrants that “posed the threat of racial upheaval.”116 Again weighing the demographic calculus of labor needs and political power inherent in black immigration to the region, Mississippi elites rewrote the state’s constitution in 1890 to limit black voting rights. The Second Mississippi Plan, like the first, sought to shore up white supremacy, and maintain the racial geography of cotton, in response to black migration. In an ironic and tragic twist, white racial theorists may have used ongoing free black migration in the era of emancipation to help rebuild geographical frameworks justifying racial capitalism in the cotton South. White southerners cited freedpeople’s intra-South migratory patterns as evidence that the Deep South was a distinct region defined by its environment, its demographics, and its agricultural system.

116 Cobb, The Most Southern Place on Earth, p. 86. See also John C. Willis, Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta after the Civil War (Charlottesville and London, 2000).
As “redemption” swept through the South in the mid-1870s, Republican politicians and thinkers began to question whether supporting ideas of black demographic concentration in the South was the right thing to do. Recognizing that the most political violence and the greatest amount of voter suppression occurred in the counties where African Americans predominated, Republicans came to understand that a racial geography situating black freedom primarily in the cotton South posed a growing threat to the functioning of American democracy. Further, such geographical concentration was also hindering efforts to integrate freedpeople into the body politic. Almost a decade after emancipation, new thinking about demographics, place, and belonging seemed in order.

In response to a letter to the editor in December 1874, the editor of the Chicago Inter-Ocean argued, for instance, that plans to encourage freedpeople’s concentration in the South should be abandoned. The letter echoed the ideas of Nathan C. Meeker and others when it suggested the Inter-Ocean should use its “influence for the emigration of the colored people to the States where they will be in the majority.” But this time, the Republican newspaper disagreed and declared that such ideas would only perpetuate racial divisions in the postwar nation. Endorsing segregation by racial geography and demographic concentration, the editor wrote, “would be to admit that there is some undefined but natural and irradicable sentiment or antagonism between the colored and white races.” Envisioning the eventual creation of a
pluralistic body politic, the *Inter-Ocean* argued that encouraging migration meant to achieve spatial segregation in the postwar South was “the most erroneous idea…possible to conceive.”¹

Three years later, Wisconsin Republican congressman Charles G. Williams told a group of black South Carolinians at an August 1 celebration of West Indian emancipation that they should give up ideas of foreign or domestic colonization. Settle “not as an isolated colony” he told the crowd, suggesting instead that they leave South Carolina for “free lands of the government” and live “interspersed where your rights will be respected and your liberties preserved.” The *Inter-Ocean*, commenting on Williams’s speech, deemed his advice “excellent.”² Far from calling for colonization or racial concentration in the cotton South, Republicans by the mid-to-late 1870s sought to encourage migration that would resettle the black population throughout the United States.

This chapter explores various ideas, put forward by thinkers and politicians white and black, North and South, to distribute the South’s African American population throughout the nation. Generally such ideas sought to settle one or both of the nation’s pressing issues in the late nineteenth century, the so-called “Negro” or race problem and the southern or sectional problem.³ Southern conservatives who proposed ideas of population distribution hoped that reducing the number of African Americans in the South would lessen any pretext for federal intervention into southern affairs. They also, more cynically, hoped to expose northern racism by promoting plans to increase the black population in the North.

Southern conservatives’ distribution schemes were minor compared with those advanced by Republican politicians and black intellectuals, however. Republican politicians generally

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¹ Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, Dec. 23, 1874, p. 4.
² Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, Aug. 16, 1877, p. 4.
pursued such plans with an aim of reconciling the sections while better integrating African Americans into the body politic. Black intellectuals focused primarily on the latter, proposing ideas of population distribution as a means of achieving an integrated democracy shorn of racial divisions. Republicans, black intellectuals, and freedpeople challenged ideas that black people belonged in the South based principally on racial theories of climatic suitability or labor needs, and they thereby redefined the geography of race and belonging.

This chapter has three parts. Its first and most substantial section reinterprets the Kansas Exodus of 1879 and 1880 as a program to fix the race and sectional problems by removing a portion of the South’s black population and resettling it in the North and West. Republican senator William Windom explicitly addressed sectionalism and national race relations when he put forward a resolution to encourage and support the Exodus (which began as a grassroots movement of black southerners); during the senatorial investigation into the Exodus, Windom steered testimony toward endorsing his plan of distribution. His proposal became a reference point for a bill introduced by South Carolina Democratic senator Matthew C. Butler in 1889, which is explored in this chapter’s second part. Butler’s bill has generally been viewed as a deportation or foreign colonization proposal, since its language primarily envisaged removing the U.S. black population to Africa. But Butler himself and others, in Senate debates and newspaper articles, conflated foreign colonization and domestic population distribution, and his bill led to as much a discussion of the latter as of the former; whichever scheme it put forward, however, Butler’s bill also revolved around the idea that the problems of sectionalism and reconciliation were, in the main, problems of population and place.

Finally, moving into the 1890s and early 1900s, the chapter turns attention to black intellectuals who proposed ideas of population distribution, focusing particularly on William S.
Scarborough and Kelly Miller. In a period during which the radical emigration ideas of Henry McNeal Turner are often set against the conservative approach of Booker T. Washington, Scarborough’s and Miller’s discussions of national programs of migration and population management have often been overlooked, but they represent an important part of late-nineteenth-century thinking about population, migration, and belonging. Throughout all three parts of the chapter runs a consistent idea: that problems of democracy, integration, and sectionalism were intimately tied to the nation’s demographic geography, and that a program of domestic migration aimed at a national redistribution of the black population could solve those problems.

Importantly, like with the climate-based racial geography explored in the previous chapter or the geopolitical information networks explored in chapter 1, the idea of distributing the black population had deep roots. It first appeared as an idea in the early republic, as politicians considered the place of slavery in the fledgling United States. Territorial expansion, first into the Mississippi territory and then into the lands of the Louisiana purchase, coincided with the Haitian Revolution, the largest and most successful slave rebellion in the Americas. As the founding generation considered the future of slavery in the United States, those who held antislavery positions thought that the nation’s new western territories offered a way both to attenuate the threat of slave revolt and to begin a move toward general and gradual abolition.

Known as “diffusionism,” a policy position to halt the importation of foreign slaves into the United States while distributing the enslaved population of the original slave states took hold in debates over peopling the new territories. John Breckenridge, a Kentucky Republican, led the diffusionist movement in the U.S. Senate, suggesting that the policy “will disperse and weaken that race—and free the southern states from a part of its black population, & of its danger.”

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Virginia Republican, William Giles, argued similarly that, “by lessening the number [of slaves] in those States, and spreading them over a large surface of country, there would be a greater probability in ameliorating their condition, which could never be done whilst they are crowded together as they are now in the Southern States.” Thomas Jefferson and James Madison agreed with the idea of diffusion, perceiving that the geographical concentration of enslaved people in certain parts of the nation would lead to sectionalism in politics. As the discussion below shows, the Reconstruction era discussions of population distribution had much in common with the ideas and language of the diffusionists.

The Kansas Exodus and Population Distribution

The Kansas Exodus emerged out of years of local organizing, built on the history of intra-South migration, and became the first large-scale movement of African Americans to search for belonging outside the U.S. South in the Reconstruction era. The Exodus, which began haltingly in 1878 before cresting in 1879 and 1880, has been interpreted as a movement predicated on the reversals of freedpeople’s civil and political rights following southern redemption in the mid-1870s and the end of formal Reconstruction efforts in 1877. Nell Irvin Painter, whose 1976 monograph on the Exodus is still the standard account of the migratory movement, identified fears of “actual or effective reenslavement” as the primary motivations of the Exodusters, and she emphasized freedpeople’s growing concerns about sharecropping, debt, and access to education in the mid-to-late 1870s. Agitation over local conditions turned into discussions of

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5 Giles, quoted in Rothman, *Slave Country*, p. 25.
whether migration to somewhere else, particularly somewhere outside of the South, could offer a solution. By 1878, and substantially during 1879, black southerners began making their way to Kansas and other midwestern states, putting into action what had long been discussed. Many of those who considered migration to Kansas had already experienced migration as a shaping force of freedom: the heart of the Exodus movement was the Mississippi Delta, the very region that had been the destination for many migratory freedpeople in the decade after emancipation.8

The movement’s organized impetus had roots in earlier colonization and convention movements in the 1870s. As early as 1872, the Alabama Colored Labor Union considered emigration from the South as a solution to problems of economic oppression faced by Alabama sharecroppers. The chairman of the convention’s committee on emigration stated that Kansas had cheap and fertile lands and suggested black sharecroppers could set up as independent farmers in the Midwest. The convention took no action on the chairman’s suggestions.9 Two years later, however, Democrats gained control of Alabama, and, having lost hope that the gains of Reconstruction would last, a convention that met that December began considering a “Mass Exodus” from the state. The convention authorized a delegation to tour the Midwest to locate suitable destinations for potential Alabama emigrants. Historian Judy Bussell LeForge argues that the Kansas Exodus grew out of these earlier conventions, and she particularly shows how James T. Rapier, who became deeply involved in the Kansas movement in 1879, developed his stance toward out-of-the-South migration through these conventions.10

The movement also had roots in more clandestine networks of local black leadership. In what Steven Hahn has termed “grassroots emigrationism,” a loose network of southern black

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8 See chapter 3.
leaders began considering migration as a political tool in the 1870s. Initially such movements grew out of the information networks and mobile occupations freedpeople built in the era of emancipation. Henry Adams, a literate former slave who enlisted in the Union army in 1866, represents the transformation of kinship networks and local mobility into an organized political movement. Adams traveled throughout the lower South (primarily Louisiana) during his enlistment and took stock of how freedpeople were treated. After receiving his discharge from the army, Adams organized a secret committee to travel through the South, with members working their way “from place to place and State to State.” Reporting back on conditions they found in various locations, the committee aimed to “see whether there was any State in the South where we could get a living and enjoy our rights.” Surprisingly, given the general trend of postwar black migration and reactions to it in the Mississippi Delta region, the committee reported that Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee offered the best locations for black laborers in the South.

By 1874, however, as Democrats began to reassert control over the South, Adams’s committee restyled itself as the Colonization Council and began to search for a place outside of the South. Meeting in Shreveport, Louisiana, the council sent petitions to Congress and President Ulysses S. Grant, asking for the federal government “to set apart a territory in the United States for us, somewhere we could go and live with our families.” Adams held out further possibilities, should a territory not materialize: he also suggested the council would seek colonization to Liberia or elsewhere overseas if a place in the United States could not be secured.

11 See chapter 1.
12 Testimony of Henry Adams, in Report and Testimony of the Select Committee of the United States Senate to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes from the Southern States to the Northern States, in Three Parts (Washington, D.C., 1880), part 2, p. 102. (This source hereafter cited as Senate Report.) See also Steven Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), chap. 7.
Adams’s organizational skill and breadth of contacts throughout the South, as well as his lengthy testimony during the 1880 Senate investigation of the Exodus, certainly set him out as an exceptional figure. He claimed to represent at least 69,000 black southerners interested in emigration. But Adams’s council was only one of many local groups of freedpeople considering migration to points beyond the South in the mid-1870s. Kinship groups, church congregations, and plantation councils sent letters to the American Colonization Society expressing interest in removal from the South throughout the period. Many interested migrants recognized they could not afford to move to Liberia and indicated they would just as readily consider destinations in the Midwest and West. Hahn argues that the ease with which local emigrationist sentiment varied between such disparate locations as Kansas and Liberia demonstrates that “the favored destination of interested southern blacks could shift and often depended on the circumstances of local social and political life.”¹⁴ Unlike the larger convention movements, such as the 1874 Alabama convention, few of these local groups envisaged any emigration activity beyond that of their own group. They did not, in other words, seek to organize or encourage a mass exodus from the South.

Thus when the Kansas Exodus took shape in the spring of 1879, it built on the history of intra-South migration and the information and kinship networks forged by slavery and emancipation.¹⁵ The movement had no overall leadership or structure. It was, much like free black migration from the upper South to the Gulf states explored in the previous chapters, a movement of family groups and neighborhoods with diverse motivations, sharing only a loose sense of particular destinations. Because of its abundant government and railroad lands and its history of antislavery violence, Kansas gained prominence among many Exodusters, but

¹⁴ Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, p. 335.
¹⁵ Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, p. 337.
Nebraska, Indiana, Colorado, and other states also figured conspicuously into migrants’ mental maps of potential destinations.

Senator William Windom, a Minnesota Republican, wanted to turn the disconnected flow of southern emigrants into a systematic population movement. On January 16, 1879, Windom introduced a resolution to create a committee of seven senators to explore the possibility of “encouraging and promoting by all just and proper methods the partial migration of colored persons” from parts of the South to “such States as may desire to receive them…or into such Territory or Territories of the United States as may be provided for their use and occupation.” Windom thought most problems of race relations in the South resulted from hostility toward black majorities in certain districts, and his resolution was more focused on the removal aspect than on the resettlement, thus its vagueness regarding the destination. Windom expressed hope that such a movement would result in both “the elimination of sectionalism from politics” and the protection of black civil and political rights in the nation.16 The Exodus, Windom believed, had handed Congress a way to solve the race and sectional problems, if only its energy could be harnessed and directed in a more systematic way.

Three weeks later, Windom elaborated on the purpose of his resolution, and much of his framing of the issue would be repeated in similar proposals in later years. Windom argued that white southerners were most hostile to black political participation in places with black majorities. He told the Senate “that it is only where such majorities exist that difficulties occur.” Referencing the language of his original proposal, Windom suggested a “partial migration” would offer an “effective solution” to the problem of racial discord: “Let a considerable portion of the colored people of Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, and perhaps

16 *Proceedings and Debates*, 45 Cong., 3 sess., p. 483.
some other States, migrate to some suitable and convenient place.” Such a migration, he declared, presented “the most judicious, peaceful, and practical method of solving the race problem.” Moreover, by removing a portion of the South’s black population, the advocated migration would also remove the need for federal intervention into southern affairs and would thus “banish sectionalism from politics.” Windom further suggested that such a redistribution of the black population would improve conditions for those who remained in the South. “The proposed exodus from the overcrowded districts,” he argued, “would reduce the labor supply to the demand point,” thereby raising wages for black southerners.

As in his original resolution, Windom remained vague about where the “removed” population would resettle. He did, however, indicate an understanding of grassroots emigrationism. Referencing letters he had received from “colored people in nearly every State” since the publication of his proposal, Windom reported that “numerous emigration societies are already in existence among them….the bishops and ministers of their various churches will head the exodus.” Windom discerned widespread interest in out-of-the-South migration, and he recognized the local nature of emigration groups. His vagueness on a point of destination was likely strategic: he did not want to suggest the movement would rely on government aid in the form of homesteads, and he did not want to incur political opposition from any state that he might name as a destination. Windom also imagined his proposal as a first step toward a system

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17 *Proceedings and Debates*, 45 Cong., 3 sess., pp. 1077-78.
18 *Proceedings and Debates*, 45 Cong., 3 sess., p. 1079. Windom summed up his position: “I think it is, therefore, true that, the presence of colored majorities in certain localities at the South, not only operates greatly to the disadvantage of the black race in those districts where such majorities exist, but also throughout the entire country, and that the certain consequence of changing that condition, as proposed, would be a great advance in the state of the colored man in all the States….Not only would the colored people be better provided for, and more secure in their political and personal rights, and the South richer and more prosperous, but the entire Union would rejoice in the solution of the race problem, and the consequent cessation of sectional discord.” *Proceedings and Debates*, 45 Cong., 3 sess., p. 1080.
19 *Proceedings and Debates*, 45 Cong., 3 sess., p. 1081.
of population distribution—his resolution merely called for the creation of a senatorial committee to consider the proposal. Presumably one of the committee’s tasks would be figuring out where migrants would be directed.

No Senate committee formed in response to Windom’s resolution. Instead, as the Exodus took on ever larger dimensions in the summer and fall of 1879, rumors emerged that the movement was a Republican scheme to encourage black voters to leave the South and settle in Republican midwestern states, with the aim of reducing southern congressional representation and strengthening the position of northern Republicans. As North Carolina Exodusters began making their way to Indiana, which had gone Democratic by a slim majority in 1876, alarmed Democrats in Washington went on the offensive. Indiana Democratic senator Daniel Vorhees introduced a resolution in December 1879 to form a committee to investigate the causes of the Exodus.20

Vorhees hoped to ascertain and expose the party influences behind the movement, but Windom realized he could use the investigative committee to further advance the cause of his population distribution proposal itself. He introduced an amendment to Vorhees’s resolution, specifying that the committee would investigate whether the causes of the Exodus were related to racial violence and oppression and the curtailment of African Americans’ civil and political rights in the South. His amendment further directed the committee to inquire “whether the peaceful adjustment of all sectional issues may not best be secured by the distribution of the colored race, through their partial migration” from districts with black majorities to other states and territories beyond the South.21 The Senate voted in favor of the resolution on December 18,

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20 For issues of national party politics spawned by the Exodus, see Robert G. Athearn, In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879–80 (Lawrence, Kans., 1978), chap. 11.
21 Proceedings and Debates, 45 Cong., 3 sess., pp. 124-25. During debate on the resolution and amendment, it was suggested that Windom hoped to distribute the black population equally through all congressional districts. Windom demurred on this point and replied, rather cryptically, “It distributes itself. It was a partial distribution that was referred to in the resolution I offered.” Proceedings and Debates, 45 Cong., 3 sess., p. 163.
1879, and appointed a five-member committee of three Democrats (including Vorhees) and two Republicans (including Windom), known colloquially as the Vorhees committee, to investigate the Kansas Exodus.\textsuperscript{22}

The committee carried out its investigation between January and April 1880. The witness testimony, reports, and collected documents spanned three volumes and numbered close to 1,600 pages. Though it pales in comparison with the thirteen volumes (and 7,000 pages) of the 1871 congressional investigation into Ku Klux Klan violence, the Exodus hearing nonetheless represents a significant effort to catalog racial violence and oppression in the era of Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{23} The Democratic majority report, however, concluded that “the causes of discontent among those people [black southerners] could not have arisen from any deprivation of their political rights or any hardship in their condition.” Ignoring the weight of testimony and evidence, Vorhees and his fellow Democrats declared the Exodus the result of “Northern politicians, and…negro leaders in their employ, and in the employ of railroad lines” who induced freedpeople to leave the South against their own interests.\textsuperscript{24} The Republican minority of Windom and Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire found no evidence of party or political influence in the movement, instead citing economic oppression, disfranchisement, and racial violence on the part of white southerners against freedpeople as the causes of the Exodus.

The minority report referenced long-standing interest in emigrationism and, denying the influence of white politicians, declared that the “movement originated entirely with the hands of the colored people themselves.” As he had a year before when introducing his proposal, Windom

\textsuperscript{22} The final version of the resolution did not contain Windom’s amendment, though it had been modified from Vorhees’s initial language to indicate, as Windom suggested, that the primary alleged causes of the Exodus were “unjust and cruel conduct” and the “abridgement of [African Americans’] personal and political rights and privileges.” For the final language, see \textit{Senate Report}, part 1, p. v.

\textsuperscript{23} See Kidada E. Williams, \textit{They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I} (New York and London, 2012) for the importance of black testimony.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Senate Report}, part 1, p. v.
understood that the energy behind the Exodus sprang from black grassroots organizations.\textsuperscript{25} He still hoped that energy could be better directed.

During the Senate investigation into the causes of the Exodus, Windom used the hearings to elaborate on his ideas of population distribution and steered testimony toward evidence supporting his position. In questioning North Carolina lawyer R. C. Badger, Windom stated that his “theory has been that the cause of these political disturbances in the South, and class distinctions, was the fact that in numbers of districts there are a majority of colored people…. [and] if there could be a well ordered, voluntary distribution of these colored people these sectional questions and differences would be mitigated.” He clarified, however, that the federal government would not be responsible for encouraging the migration.\textsuperscript{26} In questioning B. F. Watson, a black minister from Kansas City, Missouri, Windom elicited responses favorable to his position. Windom asked, “What do you think of the future of the Exodus,” and Watson replied he believed it offered “the only way to solve this difficult problem of the negro.” Finding that answer too vague, Windom pressed, “You mean solve it by distribution?” Watson confirmed that was indeed his meaning.\textsuperscript{27}

James T. Rapier, who had been involved in the Alabama convention movements in the early and mid-1870s, supported the Exodus and the idea of population distribution. Rapier had been elected to Congress in 1872, one of the few African Americans to hold national office during Reconstruction. While in Congress, Rapier had proposed the creation of a land bureau to distribute western lands among freedpeople. He told the Vorhees committee in 1880, “I want to see the negroes scattered from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and not huddled together.” Like

\textsuperscript{25} Senate Report, part 1, p. xxv.
\textsuperscript{26} Senate Report, part 1, p. 408.
\textsuperscript{27} Senate Report, part 2, p. 344.
Windom, Rapier thought that demographic concentration was the cause of white racial hostility in the South. “We have always thought that banding together was our strength; but in this particular case it has been our weakness,” he argued. Rapier thought the Exodus would alleviate race problems by removing black majorities, but only if the end result was distribution rather than a relocation of demographic concentration. “[W]e do not want to go to any particular State or any particular Territory, anywhere,” he told Senator Blair.\textsuperscript{28} Rapier advocated for a large-scale migration among freedpeople, but he argued that the movement should aim at the national integration, rather than separation, of African Americans.

A more substantial exchange of ideas of population distribution occurred between Senator Windom and John Davis, a farmer and Greenback newspaper editor from Junction City, Kansas. Windom asked Davis to assess the “effect of the distribution of a portion of the colored race from the thickly settled negro districts of the South to the older and richer States of the North.” He particularly wanted Davis’s opinion in relation to how such a distribution would affect the “sectional troubles.” Davis responded that a program of distribution, represented by the ongoing Exodus, would teach southerners to respect (and thus fairly remunerate) black laborers and would better acquaint white northerners with the nation’s African American population. Davis, like Windom, thought such a movement would benefit the United States as a whole. “For the future,” Davis stated, “I think it would be a great thing if this class of population could be properly distributed, in reasonable numbers and under proper conditions, to the Northern cities and towns, but especially to our country places.” Going beyond the arguments of Windom, which focused on the race and sectional problems, and prefiguring the arguments of late-nineteenth-century black intellectuals, Davis concluded that a program of population distribution

\textsuperscript{28} Senate Report, part 2, p. 482.
could significantly shape the development of national integration and pluralism. Such a movement, he thought, would “increase the homogeneity of our people, and…increase the appreciation of all classes of their rights and privileges under our common laws and free institutions.” Davis’s testimony to the Vorhees committee imagined a new geography of race and belonging; it suggested migration and demography were the keys to building an integrated body politic in the Reconstruction era.

The idea that major problems of the Reconstruction South could be solved through migration received support outside of the Senate. Windom may have been the first to cast the Exodus in the language of population distribution, but it soon became part of the wider discussion. Black leaders convened a conference in May 1879 to consider the Exodus specifically and southern race relations more generally. As had Windom when introducing his resolution earlier that year, the conference’s official proceedings remained vague on points of destination for the Exodusters. (If the point of the movement was dispersion of migrants, then no single destination could be recommended.) Like Windom, delegates to the conference referred to “States and Territories whereto the colored people of the South may migrate.” The conference’s committee on migration cited only “certain Northern States.” Even when not explicitly discussing the Exodus in terms of distribution, the Nashville conference, too,

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29 Davis’s ideas bear fuller treatment. He further elaborated on his position: “if the exodus could be properly managed so as to make a proper distribution of those that come, without the concentration of them in overwhelming numbers at certain points and thus not overburdening those points, the results would be good and not disastrous.” Asked whether he would support the establishment of a black state or territory in the West, Davis said he would not, for doing so “would be opposed to the homogeneity of our population….We ought not to have here a race class independent and separate from the body-politic.” Asked once more by Windom to clarify whether Davis thought “this homogeneity of which you speak can best be secured by their more equal distribution over the Northern States generally,” Davis confirmed his theory. “Yes; that is my idea, exactly; and I believe that many of the Northern States desire to have them, and that wherever an invitation is extended them into States and places where they may desire to have them, that desire ought to be gratified.” Senate Report, part 3, p. 233.

30 Proceedings of the National Conference of Colored Men of the United States, held in the State Capitol at Nashville, Tennessee, May 6, 7, 8 and 9, 1879 (Washington, D.C., 1879), p. 29.

31 Proceedings of the National Conference of Colored Men, p. 100.
envisaged a partial migration from the South to undefined but multiple destinations in the North and West. Indeed, the committee on migration endorsed Windom’s vision and hoped he would help organize scouting missions to locate suitable places to which Exodusters could migrate.32

At times, however, the conference presented explicit ideas of distribution, such as in a letter sent by AME reverend J. C. Embry, who was supposed to lead the committee on migration but could not attend the conference. Embry claimed that, “as a Western man,” he knew that midwestern and western states had space “for a full round million” black southerners. “Only let them be distributed,” he advised. Discerning, as Windom had, that demographic concentration provided a pretext for white hostility, Embry imagined the Exodus as a mechanism for reducing black majorities in the South without creating new ones elsewhere. He opposed the movement as a scheme for colonization. “We should avoid huddling together in any one State or community,” he told the conference. Instead, those interested in leaving the South should “spread abroad in all the great States and Territories of the great and growing West.” Embry, like Windom, hoped the western portion of the United States could fix the southern problem.

John Mercer Langston agreed. In an October 1879 speech commissioned by the Washington, D.C., Emigrant Aid Society, Langston discussed the idea of a partial migration from the South and suggested a dispersed settlement pattern in the North and West. Langston focused on the economic dimensions of a population shift, arguing that the Exodus would “so reduce the colored laborers of the South by emigration to the various States of the North and West, as to compel the land-holders—the planters—to make and observe reasonable contracts with those who remain.”33 The idea that the Exodus would reduce the supply of laborers and so

raise wages and improve treatment was common and received support from other black leaders, such as Richard T. Greener and Henry Highland Garnet.  

Langston echoed Embry and the Nashville convention in broadly defining the Exodusters’ destinations. He spoke of “localities” in the “North and West” and of “hospitable homes in the various States of the sections named.” And for Langston, too, this vagueness was strategic, for he also thought a distributed movement would be best. “It certainly would not be wise for [freedpeople] in large numbers to settle in any one State of the Union,” he declared. Statements such as this can be read as standard anti-colonization language. But, importantly, Langston and others who used such terms favored migration generally, and, in the context of the Exodus, their advice that black southerners should spread out across the northern and western states encouraged a new demographic disposition for the black population of the United States. The migration and population suggestions of black leaders such as Embry, Langston, and Greener, and of white Republicans such as Windom in 1879, Congressman Charles G. Williams in 1877, and the editor of the Inter-Ocean in 1874, went against the well-established racial geography of the antebellum and immediate postwar periods. Black geographical belonging had long been based on a racialized understanding of climate and certain types of agricultural labor and, as detailed in the previous chapter, had worked to confine black life to the southern portion of North America. If a program of population distribution was to ever be successful, it would need to redraw the nation’s racial geography and demonstrate that black people were themselves interested in seeking homes elsewhere in the nation. The Exodus became the first major

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34 Henry Highland Garnet stated that the Exodus would “bring the Southern white people to pay some little attention to the duties which they owe their laboring class.” *New York Herald*, April 3, 1879, p. 4. In his response to Frederick Douglass’s opposition to the Exodus, Richard T. Greener decried that an “excess of population…not so systematically diffused” stood in the way of freedpeople’s advancement in the South. Greener, “The Emigration of Colored Citizens from the Southern States,” *Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (May 1880), p. 25.

movement to propose new terms and places of belonging. Windom and his friendly witnesses in the Senate investigation, as well as Exodusters themselves, and their supporters more broadly, countered ideas that black people were unsuited for northern climates and that northern agriculture and industry had no use for black labor.

Langston, for instance, recognized that “It is claimed that the freedman cannot endure a Northern and Western climate. It is said that the winters in these sections are too severe for him.” Indeed, such claims often accompanied the inverse claims about black people’s climatic suitability to southern climates. But Langston, who had attended Oberlin College and lived for a time in Ohio, found little of substance behind such claims. “It is true, as justified by observation, and as facts and figures would show, could they be secured, that the colored man as he goes north into colder regions, adapts himself with ease to the climate.” Langston, in fact, went a step further, and pointed out that where “zygomatic and malarial disorders prevail…the Negro sickens and dies.” He concluded, by uncoupling the medical topography from the racial geography, that black southerners would find better health in the northern and western climates.36 Greener, too, countered ideas of climate-based belonging in his support of the Exodus. Responding to opponents of the Exodus, particularly Frederick Douglass, who suggested migrations should proceed from east to west (rather than south to north) so as to remain within “isothermal” climate bands, Greener argued that “history shows exceptions remarkable and instructive….the Southern Negro, if he emigrate to Washington Territory or

36 Langston, “The Exodus,” p. 254. As historian Rana A. Hogarth has made abundantly clear, black people understood they were not immune to “tropical diseases”; their suffering was simply ignored by white sources. See Hogarth, Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780–1840 (Chapel Hill, 2017), pp. 18-21.
Arizona, would not be as far from home as the Aryan now is.”

In other words, Greener and Langston denied climate and geography as the natural basis of spatial and social belonging.

During the Senate investigation in 1880, Windom and Blair sought practical confirmation that climate should have no bearing on the direction of black migration within the United States. In questioning Henry Adams about his communications with those who had previously emigrated to Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska, Blair asked whether any Exodusters indicated problems with the climate. Adams testified that “They says that [it] is a little colder there, than where they come from, but they said that the cold didn’t hurt them anything; they was all satisfied to stand the cold; they can stand it.” Similar statements came from others who had relocated. A statement from William Croom, who had moved from North Carolina to Putnam County, Indiana, dismissed the climate entirely: “The climate is no worse for us here than there.”

Proposing an alternative and nationwide system of population distribution required deconstructing the old racial geography that restricted black people to southern climes.

It also required demonstrating that black labor was useful outside of southern agriculture. In a nineteenth-century society wedded to ideas of productive citizenship, supporters and opponents of the Exodus agreed that labor needs formed an important basis for spatial belonging. They disagreed, however, on who was needed where. The Democratic majority of the Vorhees

37 Greener, “The Emigration of Colored Citizens from the Southern States,” pp. 29-30. Douglass argued that the South was the best place for freedpeople because they alone could labor effectively there. In contrast to the white man, Douglass wrote, “the negro walks, labors, or sleeps in the sunlight unharmed. The standing apology for slavery was based on this fact.” It is unclear whether Douglass truly believed in race-based theories of climatic belonging, but he certainly deployed such arguments in opposing the Exodus. “Naturally enough,” he wrote, “emigration follows lines of latitude in which they who compose it were born. Not from South to North, but from East to West….Neither heat, nor the fever demon that lurks in her tangled and oozy swamps affrights [the black man], and he stands today the admitted author of whatever prosperity, beauty and civilization are now possessed by the South.” Douglass’s comments focused on the necessity of black labor for southern development as a means of advocating better working and living conditions for southern freedpeople, but his comments nonetheless perpetuated the idea that black people were racially and constitutionally suited for particular climates and types of labor. Frederick Douglass, “The Negro Exodus from the Gulf States,” Journal of Social Science 11 (May 1880), pp. 3-4.

38 Senate Report, part 2, p. 118.

committee repeatedly called witnesses to testify that black labor was not needed for northern or midwestern agriculture. An exchange between Senator Zebulon B. Vance and Fort Scott, Kansas, lawyer A. A. Harris exemplified the argument that black labor had no place in northern agriculture. Harris stated that “the colored people who come…from the South are not accustomed to our kind of labor. Our labor is not the growing of cotton or tobacco, as it is in the South, but the cultivation of land, with improved machinery.”

He went on to explain that black southerners were not familiar with the crops or the techniques of midwestern farming. In a slightly different formulation of the same argument, rather than suggesting black farmers were unfamiliar with northern agriculture, some witnesses simply denied the need for additional labor. A. J. Allen, a railroad attorney in Ottawa, Kansas, for instance, told the Vorhees committee that mechanization obviated the need for manual labor in prairie agriculture. “[A]ll the work that can be done by machinery is done in that way,” he stated. “There is no demand for the laborer.”

The Republican minority sought to prove the opposite, and they elicited testimony that constructed a basis for black belonging outside the South through appeals to labor needs. Virling K. Morris, for instance, testified that he used to farm in Indiana and often had trouble hiring enough hands. Senator Blair asked Morris to consider, in regard to prospective employment needs in the state, the effect of an immigration of ten to twenty thousand freedpeople. Morris stated they could find employment, though he qualified this was if “they were scattered about” across the state.

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40 Senate Report, part 2, p. 420.
41 Senate Report, part 3, p. 128. Mechanization had, indeed, played a larger role in midwestern corn and wheat farming at this point than in southern cotton, sugar, rice, or tobacco planting, and it had made the midwestern crops less reliant on manhours. But racialized understandings of African Americans’ farming capabilities also shaped these responses. See chapter 3, footnote 38 for a discussion of beliefs that black farmers were less capable of improved farming techniques.
42 Senate Report, part 1, p. 199.
A witness from Greencastle, Indiana, George Langsdale, testified not only that was there a need for labor in his state but also that black farmers from the South had no difficulty learning northern agricultural practices. Langsdale, as publisher of the *Greencastle Banner*, had carried out extensive correspondence with both Exodusters and Indiana farmers. Senator Blair asked Langsdale, “What do your farmers say as to their readiness and capacity to adapt themselves to your farming methods?” Langsdale replied that the farmers he had communicated with “say they take hold with wonderful facility and a good deal of skill.” The only complaint he had heard from an Indiana farmer about a southern migrant involved one man who did not wake up early enough to suit his employer.\(^43\) Satisfied that testimony demonstrated both space for additional laborers and black southerners’ ability to engage in northern agriculture, Windom and Blair concluded in their minority report, “It is *not* proven that there is no demand for their labor at the North, for nearly all those who have come have found employment.”\(^44\)

Exodusters themselves repeatedly professed their ability and desire to work hard in their new homes. They too denied that climate was a barrier to migration and sought belonging based, instead, on assurances of welcome and promises of productivity. Charles Movri, writing on behalf of a group of interested migrants in Wayne County, Mississippi, for instance, emphasized the agricultural skills of the people he represented. “They are very good farmers,” he told Kansas governor John St. John. Suggesting his group would prove beneficial to the state, Movri repeated the line a sentence later.\(^45\)

\(^{43}\) *Senate Report*, part 2, p. 321.  
\(^{44}\) *Senate Report*, part 1, p. xxiv. Emphasis in original.  
\(^{45}\) Charles Movri to Governor St. John, January 12, 1880. Governor John St. John, Exoduster Received Correspondence, Kansas State Historical Society, accessed via www.kansasmemory.org/item/210296. (This collection hereafter cited as ERC.)
A group of Exodusters in Concordia Parish, Louisiana, used similar language. Asking the governor of Kansas for information about the state, including “if you raise cotton or not,” the group stated, “we are all honest working men and weman [sic] and not afraid of work.” They also dismissed concerns about the climate. “[W]e can stand any amount of cold weather,” they wrote. Laying their claims to belonging on ideas of productive citizenship, the group concluded their letter with an appeal to sentiment. If we can make it up there, they told St. John, “you all will be proud of us.” Often such assurances were meant in part to dispel the notion that potential migrants were destitute and would encumber the state as public wards. “[W]e are coming to your state not to be seppered [sic] but to mantain our selves,” a group from Alabama promised. But the rhetoric of the letter then went a step further. The Alabama group wrote in terms of community and commonweal. We want “to contribut something to the well being of the state,” they told the governor.

Indeed, in their letters to St. John and other officials, potential Exodusters repeatedly invoked language that reflected what historian Stephen Kantrowitz has described as a desire for “more than citizenship,” or, put differently, a “rapprochement of hearts and minds” with their white fellow citizens. By sending letters asking for information about Kansas and surrounding states, Exodusters made St. John part of their information and migration networks, and they sought confirmation that there was, in fact, a place for them in Kansas. Benjamin J. Coverly, writing from St. Mary Parish, Louisiana, for instance, asked St. John “if it is advisable for us to leave the South here & come to your State for better treatment socially & politically.”

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46 Ellis Jones to Governor St. John, May 15, 1879, ERC.
47 J. W. Dunhee, Uniontown, Perry County, Alabama to Governor St. John, June 17, 1879, ERC
49 Benjamin J. Coverly, Morgan City, St. Mary Parish, Louisiana to Governor St. John, May 27, 1879, ERC.
knowing if there were jobs available was not enough—Exodusters wanted to build a reciprocal relationship where their hard work and productive contributions would earn them welcome.

James Jefferson Goodwyn, writing on behalf of an emigration organization assembled in Shelby County, Texas, asked Governor St. John for the usual information regarding how to locate homes and jobs in Kansas. But he also asked “whether you [St. John] do desire in good faith for us to come or not.” They had heard “so many differenc [sic] tails” and rumors about opposition to their presence in the Midwest, many spread by local white planters who feared the loss of labor, and they needed reassurance they would find welcome there. A bare right to mobility—to cross into Kansas—did not satisfy their desire for belonging.\(^{50}\) G. W. Jackson represented “all the people of this county” when he told St. John they wished to immigrate to Kansas provided that Kansans “encerge us by send[ing] us some enstruction a bout the country.”\(^{51}\) Benjamin F. Coke, writing from Maryland, made plain his desire to “make my home among you” by “every honorable way and means in my power, and by industry.” In return for given information and a welcome, Coke pledged that he “shall ever hold my self under manny obligations to you.”\(^{52}\)

Exodusters were leaving the South because though their labor was valued there, their presence as citizens and neighbors was not. Their letters to St. John repeatedly indicated a desire to know that their white fellow citizens in the Midwest would welcome them. Through

\(^{50}\) James Jefferson Goodwyn to Governor St. John, Nov. 3, 1879, ERC.

\(^{51}\) G. W. Jackson to Governor St. John, Nov. 22, 1880, ERC.

\(^{52}\) Benjamin F. Coke, Baltimore, Towson County, Maryland to Governor St. John, Aug. 25, 1879, ERC. Some of these appeals also exhibited the sort of dependency and patronal rhetoric Gregory P. Downs has identified as a key element of nineteenth-century political language. A group of Alabama Exodusters, for example, stated that if Governor St. John “will help us in our distresses we will be to your subjics in en[y] form or fashon We will bind our selfs to you en any degree whatever may be the cost.” Hardy Palmer to Governor St. John, October 20, 1879. Another group from Texas told St. John, “Dear Sir we people of the South do earnestly claim you to be our father.” James Jefferson Goodwyn to Governor St. John, Nov. 3, 1879, ERC. See Downs, \textit{Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861–1908} (Chapel Hill, 2011).
constructing themselves as hard workers and productive citizens, as well as unbounded by climatic concerns, Exodusters helped redraw the geography of belonging in the Reconstruction era in a way that facilitated ideas of population distribution. Most of their letters sought advice on how and where to settle. Many wrote to St. John because they had seen his name in newspapers or heard it through the grapevine, and Kansas certainly factored heavily into their imagined landscapes as a destination. But when contemplating actual resettlement, most Exodusters displayed a willingness to be directed in their choice of location, giving support to ideas of voluntary migration to achieve distribution, as Windom’s resolution had called for.

Driven by both the practical need to send Exodusters to where jobs and supplies were located and by a set of ideas about how to best achieve “assimilation” or “absorption” of immigrant populations, aid societies and benevolent organizations did their best to transform the Exodus into an organized program of population distribution. In March 1880, for instance, W. O. Lynch, a member of the Kansas Freedmen’s Relief Association (KFRA), issued a circular advising interested migrants to head to either St. Louis, Missouri, or Cairo, Illinois, where branch offices of the KFRA would direct them to various locations. Lynch suggested that it would be “prudent and expedient to turn the tide of emigration…into other States than Kansas.” Doing so was not difficult, in his opinion, because the KFRA had received “hundreds of applications for laborers to come into Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa, Michigan, and Ohio.”

53 Senate Report, part 3, p. 368.

54 Apparently, Governor St. John sent a letter to Comstock requesting her to “induce the people of Illinois to form an organization” to handle the logistics of matching migrants with employment and to advertise the state as a destination. Comstock’s convening of the meeting in Chicago was in response to St. John’s suggestions. The two were in frequent communication during the winter and spring 1879 and 1880.
Relief workers and public officials carefully considered not just the employment opportunities at various locations but also the social dynamics of resettling a population. Chief among their concerns was the relative ability of different states to accept certain numbers of migrants, or what might be thought of as carrying capacity. Senator John Ingalls of Kansas, a supporter of Windom’s, reportedly stated that Kansas could take 100,000 southern emigrants. Green B. Raum, U.S. commissioner of internal revenue, backed up the assertion Illinois had room for 50,000 and advised Exodusters to “scatter through Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin.” John C. Fremont suggested 20,000 go to Arizona. Comstock’s fellow aid worker and organizer, Laura S. Haviland, envisioned a well-ordered system of distribution. “So scattered, family by family, to the extent of 10 per cent. of our population, which would absorb more than are likely to come,” she wrote as the secretary of the KRFA, “they will never be felt as a disturbing element in the social or business life of our people.” To that end, Lynch, Comstock, Haviland, and other aid workers carried out extensive correspondence to ascertain community sentiment and employment opportunities throughout the northern and midwestern states.

They also found that while Exodusters generally desired to remain with their kinship units, they were not set on settling in separate black colonies, nor were they set on particular states or regions. Indeed, historian Anthony E. Kaye’s work on slave neighborhoods in the Old South sheds light on the organization and community structure of Exoduster groups. Though calling themselves “colonization” and “emigration” societies, these groups were simply local communities who wished to pool their resources and, if possible, settle near each other (that is,

56 Senate Report, part 3, p. 371.
57 Anthony E. Kaye, Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South (Chapel Hill, 2007) reimagines the basic unit of community formation as the “neighborhood,” a local unit made up of “adjoining plantations” and containing within it important ties of kinship, labor, and faith. Kaye notes that neighborhoods “endured as a cornerstone of Reconstruction” (p. 220).
as a neighborhood unit) in a new location. As their letters to St. John indicated, Exodusters were eager to accept advice and to be directed in their choice of settlement location. They did not want to be a “disturbing element.” Louis Doplar, writing from St. Mary’s Parish, Louisiana, was representative of many Exodusters. He planned to migrate with “10 or 20 men and familys, so as we may live in the same Settle ments,” but hoping to avoid animosity in his new home, Doplar wrote, “I hope this Will not give trubile to you.” Like many who looked to leave the South in the late 1870s, Doplar balanced the desire to stay together as a group against the realities of labor needs and the possibility of encountering prejudice in Kansas or other states. And he, like many Exodusters who came in contact with various aid societies, was willing to have others direct the terms of his resettlement. “I do not thinke I am home yet & withe you help I may fet[ch] home some day,” he concluded.58

With Windom pushing the idea of population distribution in the Senate, Comstock, Haviland, and others pursuing it on the ground, and Exodusters themselves being open to go where they were directed, the Exodus briefly took on the form of a population distribution system. But no bill ever materialized in the Senate, and aid societies suffered financial and personnel problems. Southern planters begrudgingly indicated they would offer higher wages and better contract terms to retain their laborers, and the ad hoc and disorganized nature of the Exodus left it with little sustaining energy. The movement petered out as 1880 and 1881 wore on. It had, however, furthered serious consideration of the idea that the problems of race and section could be solved by a distribution of the black population throughout the United States. It had also demonstrated a widespread desire among African Americans to leave the South voluntarily. Though it failed as a migratory movement, the Kansas Exodus succeeded in

58 Louis Doplar to Governor St. John, ERC.
challenging the postwar racial geography and in rewriting the terms of belonging in the
Reconstruction era. The Exodus appeared as a touchpoint for resurgent ideas of population
distribution in later decades.

**Ideas of Population Distribution after the Exodus**

Albion W. Tourgée had watched the Exodus with interest. A long-time Republican
advocate of equal rights for African Americans and an opponent of the federal retreat from
Reconstruction, he saw the movement as a possible solution to race problems in the nation and
sympathized with the freedpeople leaving the South. Tourgée corresponded with Governor St.
John and Elizabeth Comstock, seeking information on the Exodus and offering to give a
fundraising lecture. He also offered to sell to Exodusters on advantageous terms 160 acres of
land he had in Butler County, Kansas. Tourgée supported the movement and incorporated it as
a plot element in his 1880 novel *Bricks without Straw*, which dealt with racial violence and the
aftermath of Reconstruction.

The failure of the Exodus to result in a large-scale out-of-the-South migration also shaped
Tourgée’s activism and writing, seemingly convincing him that the South was to remain the
home of black demographic majorities. To that end he published, in 1884, a proposal for
nationally funded education, which he titled *An Appeal to Caesar*. Tourgée based his argument
on the idea that democracy required that the will of the majority be heard and respected, and that,
since African Americans were the majority at state and county levels in much of the South, they
should be able to direct government policy in those places. Tourgée’s vision was an idealistic
assessment of the nation’s essentially unchanged racial geography, but it reminded conservatives

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59 Albion Tourgée to Dear Madam, July 29, 1881, ERC.
that if freedpeople were able to exercise the franchise in the South, they would control ballots throughout the region.

Like many who considered political and social questions in relation to demographics, Tourgée drew on census data to form his argument. He suggested that there was little evidence of black emigration from the South but that there was evidence of white emigration from the region. He concluded “that in the year 1900…each of the States lying between Maryland and Texas will have a colored majority within its borders; and we shall have eight minor republics of the Union in which either the colored race will rule or the majority will be disfranchised.” He added a warning to those who saw the abrogation of majority rule as a sectional issue: “Let those who think the Nation has no interest in the matter ponder this very serious fact.” As Tourgée suggested, since the southern states were ignoring the will of their majorities and were discriminating in the allocation of education funds, the federal government should intervene with a national system of education. Flipping Windom’s logic on its head, Tourgée suggested that the continued presence of black majorities in the South legitimated, even necessitated, the federal government’s intervention in southern affairs.

In the decade following the Exodus movement, politicians, journalists, intellectuals, and activists continued to discuss the problem of black majorities in the South and ideas of population distribution. As Tourgée argued, and others understood, black majorities in the South, if politically impotent, would be an abrogation of democracy, but if those majorities were given their due political weight, it would amount to, as Tourgée put it, “black republics” from the Potomac to the Mississippi. As Tourgée’s text indicated, in the wake of Windom and the Exodus, people began to consider more broadly how demographics, representation, democracy, and

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federalism might work in the post-Reconstruction state. Rather than posing just a race problem or a sectional problem, demographic concentration posed a problem for the very idea of American governance and democracy.

In 1886, the Republican-aligned, Washington-based newspaper the National Republican published a series of letters to the president, together with a number of brief notices, in an attempt to get the Democratic administration on board with the idea of distributing the southern black population. Speaking directly to President Grover Cleveland, the National Republican on April 3, 1886, echoed Windom’s reasoning from 1879. “The suppression of the vote of the colored men by fraud, intimidation, and murder is practiced in the states where the largest proportion of the colored population to the white population reside,” the letter stated. To promote “the general welfare” and “to excuse any political issue between races,” the letter urged Cleveland “that a wiser distribution of the colored population be at once inaugurated.” In the National Republican’s scheme, 500,000 African Americans “from the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina” would be redistributed outside of the South, “where they would bear but a small proportion to the white population.” In place of those leaving the South, the National Republican hoped, white immigrants from Europe would move in and turn the South solidly Republican, while the black vote would augment the ranks of Republican voters in the North and Midwest.61

The National Republican thus, twenty years after Jacob Dolson Cox and others had proposed a geographical segregation between white and black freedom, suggested a scheme to nationalize free soil and reconfigure the postwar racial geography. The letter concluded with an appeal to the importance of the task. Not only would “a new south awaken” in the wake of black

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61 National Republican, April 3, 1886, p. 4.
emigration, but also “[t]he civilized world would commend the act as one of profound
statesmanship.” Pursuing a program of population distribution, the *National Republican*
declared, would be akin to issuing a new emancipation proclamation.62

Over the coming weeks the *National Republican* kept up a steady stream of brief
mentions, usually as short as a sentence, reminding readers of its ideas of redistributing the black
population. “Distribution of the colored population of the south promises a peaceful and
beneficent solution of the greatest problem in our political situation,” it wrote on April 5.63 Two
days later the paper called on “Patriot citizens north and south [to] organize for a wiser
distribution of the colored population.”64 On April 9, the *National Republican* claimed that “The
movement for a better distribution of the colored population of the south is gaining strength
because it commends itself to general approval.”65

Two weeks after its initial letter, the *National Republican* published another “breakfast
table letter to the president” discussing population distribution. Claiming that the issue was
important because it had bearing on the nation’s “republican government,” the paper argued that
“political necessity, the power and demands of organized labor, [and] the love of liberty all
combine to work out the problem of the redistribution of the colored population within the area
of the United States.” (Indeed, the letter underscored that this was a domestic migration proposal,
and that “it must be voluntary.”) Where the earlier letter had called on President Cleveland to
address Congress on the matter, the *National Republican* now asked him to initiate private
efforts in this direction by pledging $1,000 toward an eventual $100,000 fund to establish an
“employment bureau” that would facilitate the movement. Such an action, the letter concluded,

63 *National Republican*, April 5, 1886, p. 2.
64 *National Republican*, April 7, 1886, p. 2.
65 *National Republican*, April 9, 1886, p. 2.
would “result in the settlement upon a just and humane basis of the vexed question of race in the administration of our government.”

On April 24 the National Republican wrote another letter to the president, this time claiming, “The distribution of the colored population over a larger area of the United States is today the fixed policy of the colored man.” The letter argued that African Americans had lost hope in the power of the franchise in the South, and that, in response, “They, therefore, advise their people to migrate to other states and territories of the Union for the benefit of those who go and those they leave behind.” As had Windom, the National Republican wanted to make it clear that it was advocating only for public and private support for a black-led, voluntary movement. It wanted the federal government and private philanthropy to encourage and direct, and not to force, such a movement. On May 4 it claimed support for its plan from the black press.

The April 24 letter cited the likely failure of Senator Henry W. Blair’s education bill as a reason to move forward on a program to distribute the South’s black population. Blair’s bill, which put into legislative form what Tourgée’s Appeal to Caesar had advocated, called for national aid to and control over education, with each state’s allotment of federal funding dependent on the number of illiterate people in the state. The bill aimed to improve education for black southerners, and, as Tourgée suggested, it used the presence of an illiterate black population as a pretext for federal intervention into southern affairs. The National Republican, noting the control of both the executive and Congress by Democrats, predicted the failure of Blair’s bill but nonetheless thought framing its argument around the issue of federal intervention

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66 National Republican, April 17, 1886, p. 4.
67 I have not yet found, via keyword searches of black newspapers, evidence of support from the black press in April 1886. The Washington Bee, which would seem a likely newspaper to have responded to the National Republican (both being Washington, D.C., based papers), does not appear to have taken any notice of the National Republican’s distribution ideas in 1886. There was certainly widespread interest in emigration during this period, as evidenced by the ongoing movements toward Arkansas and the southwest, and such movements were sometimes cast in the language of relocating an abundance of labor, but not in the explicit language of population redistribution.
would appeal to Democratic leaders. In the National Republican’s logic, population distribution, when put in relation to Tourgée’s argument and Blair’s bill, should draw Democratic support because it would remove an argument for federal oversight of southern states. If southern Democrats did not want to support federal aid to education, perhaps they would support federal aid to black emigration from the South.68

Or perhaps not, at least in 1886. The National Republican dropped the issue, and Blair’s bill failed to advance in that session of Congress. But ideas of population distribution continued to percolate in the late 1880s and did eventually find limited support among southern Democratic leaders. Such ideas also found wider support and discussion among black leaders. In late 1888, J. Willis Menard, editor of the Jacksonville, Florida, Southern Leader and the first black man elected to the U.S. House of Representatives (though opposition kept him from taking his seat), wrote a letter to president-elect Benjamin Harrison.69 Menard argued that the southern black vote could only be ensured by “the ‘mailed hand’ of martial law” or by reducing southern states’ representation in proportion to their disenfranchised citizenry. He thought these solutions impractical and would only further the antipathy of white southerners toward African American political rights.70

So instead, he suggested a national program of population distribution. “There is one way to avoid the impending difficulty,” he wrote, “and that is by a general migration of a large portion of the Negroes into the northwestern and southwestern sections of the Union.” Menard posited that a removal of a portion of the black population from the cotton states, where labor

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69 Menard won a special election to fill the house seat for Louisiana’s second congressional district in 1868, but his opponent contested the election and Menard was never able to take his seat.
70 Washington Bee, Feb. 9, 1889, p. 2.
was “excessive,” would drive up wages, and so the migration would also help those who stayed behind. And Menard too put this in relation to Blair’s education bill, which was again before the Senate. “The amount of money proposed to be appropriated by the Blair Educational Bill . . . had better be diverted to aid in distributing a large portion of the Negroes from the South,” he suggested to Harrison. “The expenditure of $15,000,000 would be a cheap solution of this vexed problem.”

In 1863 Menard had made a trip to British Honduras, as a representative of the Lincoln administration, to see if it might offer a suitable location for the colonization of freedpeople, and he had expressed to Frederick Douglass his doubt that black people could ever find belonging in the United States. By the late 1880s, however, Menard, an influential and well-known man of letters, was advocating domestic distribution.

It is difficult to trace how ideas of distribution moved through journalistic and intellectual networks in the 1880s, but they were widely shared by 1889. The Wilmington, North Carolina, Messenger, for instance, advocated for population distribution that July. Commenting on a Birmingham Age-Herald article that suggested a black territory be set apart in the West, the

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71 Washington Bee, Feb. 9, 1889, p. 2.
72 Menard illustrates the ways colonization and domestic migration could overlap and shape each other. Henry McNeal Turner, for instance, advocated black migration to Arkansas in the same period he began advocating for African emigration. Menard, too, blended the two aims in the 1860s as he advocated black emigration to Africa and asked the federal government to provide homesteads for freedpeople in the West. Menard lived briefly in Jamaica in 1865 and was implicated in the Morant Bay rebellion. He was arrested and found to possess writings stating “I am a black nationalist. The prosperity and happiness of our race…lay in a separation from the white race.” Yet in the 1880s, Menard urged a Washingtonian view that racial equality could best be achieved through nonconfrontation and political cooperation. While his public stance on the proper course of racial politics shifted throughout his career, as did his stance toward foreign emigrationism, Menard consistently suggested domestic migration to the West. In this, Menard likely shared common ground with Mifflin W. Gibbs. Indeed, once he established himself in Florida, Menard became related to Gibbs through marriage. Menard’s son-in-law, Thomas Van Renssalaer Gibbs, was the son of Jonathan C. Gibbs, Mifflin’s brother who served as Florida’s secretary of state during Reconstruction. For a biography of Menard, see Glenn L. Starks, “The Biography of John Willis Menard, First African American Elected to the U.S. Congress,” in Before Obama: A Reappraisal of Black Reconstruction Era Politicians, ed. by Matthew Lynch (Santa Barbara and other cities, 2012), vol. 2, pp. 221-41. For critique of the false dichotomy between separatism and integrationism and the politics of emigrationism, see Floyd J. Miller, The Search for Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787–1863 (Urbana, Ill., 1975), pp. 271-72; Robert S. Levine, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity (Chapel Hill, 1997), pp. 5, 60-1; Kantrowitz, More than Freedom, pp. 123-24.
Messenger paternalistically argued that “The negro race will rapidly deteriorate if put off to itself in any great numbers,” and suggested that “a wider distribution of the colored people” offered a better solution. The Age-Herald called for “a more intelligent and equal distribution….Let them move by the millions into the North and Northwest until the equality of distribution is established and the irritating and even dangerous race question will be settled.”

The Charleston News and Courier agreed. “There are too many negroes in the South,” the News and Courier declared. “Deportation is impossible, annihilation is not to be considered for a moment, but dispersion or distribution must come in some way before the great Southern problem can be satisfactorily settled.”

However such ideas circulated, they again found expression in the United States Senate in 1889. This time, they were introduced and discussed by southern Democratic senators when distribution came to be folded into and conflated with a scheme for voluntary deportation of African Americans. On December 12, 1889, South Carolina senator Matthew C. Butler introduced a bill “to provide for the emigration of colored persons from the southern states.” The bill called for an appropriation of five million dollars to pay for transportation and resettlement costs for any “person of color . . . to emigrate from any of the southern states, and designating the point to which he, she, or they wish to go with a view to citizenship and permanent residence in said country.” The bill stressed that application for removal would be voluntary and tasked the quartermaster of the army with managing the logistics of the emigration. Butler’s bill named no particular destinations for the potential emigrants, though it clearly imagined locations

73 Wilmington, North Carolina, Messenger, July 26, 1889, p. 4. Ironically, the Messenger’s article was published on the anniversary of Liberian independence.
74 Charleston News and Courier, quoted in Wilmington, North Carolina, Messenger, July 26, 1889, p. 4. See also the Altoona (Pennsylvania) Tribune, July 27, 1889, p. 2, which comments (negatively) on the articles of the News Courier and the Age-Herald.
75 For full text of Butler’s bill, see Proceedings and Debates, 51 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 802; for the bill’s initial introduction to the Senate, see Proceedings and Debates, 51 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 155.
beyond the borders of the United States, and it repeated that such moves would be permanent. During the next few months of discussion, debate, and press coverage, however, the bill became wrapped up in ideas of distribution, with occasional references to Windom’s Exodus resolution, endorsements for such by prominent black leaders, and even Butler’s eventual conflation of his bill with population distribution ideas.

The press immediately lumped Butler’s bill together with proposals introduced by senators John T. Morgan of Alabama and Randall L. Gibson of Louisiana, which more explicitly called for foreign deportation. Morgan’s bill called for emigration of black southerners to the Congo Free State, and Gibson’s bill looked “to the expediency and practicability of obtaining, by purchase or otherwise, a territory where the Negroes could be colonized.”

Less than two weeks after Butler’s bill had been introduced, and before it received substantial debate, Butler himself indicated that his bill’s envisioned machinery might be used to achieve a domestic redistribution rather than a foreign deportation. In remarks made to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, outside the Senate chamber, Butler put his proposal in relation to the sectional problem, arguing as had Windom that postwar reconciliation had a demographic component, and suggested he had been considering the issues of population and migration since the time of the Exodus.

I think it will be for the best interests of both races if a large number of negroes should move into the Northern States and western territories, thus relieving the Southern States of the too great preponderance of that race. I believe this would be the best solution of the race question; if not, I am willing to adopt any other. It will, or ought, to silence the accusations brought against the Southern people that they treat the negro harshly or unjustly, because it will show that we are willing to transfer the responsibility of their treatment to those who make the charges….I have been debating in my mind for the past ten years some plans upon which we could be relieved and have been encouraging every movement of negroes from the State. This occurred to me as the most feasible, human [sic] and practicable as there is nothing coercive or compulsory about it.

76 Southwestern Christian Advocate, Dec. 19, 1889, p. 4.
77 St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Dec. 24, 1889, p. 8.
Whereas during the Exodus, southern Democratic opponents of the movement worked hard to portray the North as inhospitable to black life, and to portray the South as the best place for black people and white southerners as their best friends, Butler took the opposite tack a decade later. He hoped the sectional problem could be solved by nationalizing the race problem through population distribution. In his comments to the *Post-Dispatch*, Butler did not even mention foreign emigration.

Thus reimagined as a domestic distribution program, Butler’s bill found support from Blanche K. Bruce, an influential black leader from Mississippi who had served in the U.S. Senate from 1875 to 1881. Bruce posited there were “two methods, which, if adopted, would settle the whole race question. These are national education and distribution of the colored population of the South throughout the Western States.” Bruce cited the overabundance of black labor in the South and the corresponding low wages as the basis for his distribution suggestion. Bruce, like many white southern conservatives, had opposed the Exodus in 1879. Historian Nell Irvin Painter characterizes Bruce’s opposition to the Exodus as “uniquely barren of sympathy or comprehension,” but Bruce appears to have mostly railed against the disorganized nature of the movement and not necessarily against migration itself. Indeed, Bruce had long been friends with Mifflin W. Gibbs and had at least tacitly supported his encouragement of black migration to Arkansas. Whatever his reasons, ten years removed from the Exodus, Bruce was ready to endorse a southern Democratic program of distributing the black population.

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79 Painter, *Exodusters*, pp. 243-44. Bruce may have opposed the Exodus as a mass movement because he was an elected official who relied on black constituents. If his constituents left the state he represented, it would harm his position and influence. By 1890, Bruce held an appointed position as recorder of deeds for Washington, D.C., so his position was no longer reliant on a black southern constituency. This change of circumstances may have freed Bruce to support migration in 1890 in a way he could not in 1879.
In the course of Senate debate following the comments in the *Post-Dispatch*, Butler’s bill morphed into a scheme for domestic distribution. Senator Morgan, who himself was pushing an African colonization program, likened Butler’s proposal to the Exodus. “[W]hen Mr. Windom…was a member of this body he advocated a plan for dispersing our negro population through the States by voluntary, but invited, migration….The measure proposed by the senator from South Carolina [Mr. Butler] is based upon the same theory.”\(^{80}\) Morgan declared he had supported Windom’s plan in 1879 and that he supported Butler’s now, too. (Windom’s resolution never actually came up for vote in the 1879 session, so Morgan’s support cannot be confirmed.)

Zebulon Vance, who had led the opposition to the Exodus from North Carolina, also came to endorse an idea of population distribution. Vance went further than Butler in stating explicitly his hope that a population distribution would expose northern racism and result in fixing the sectional problem by nationalizing the race problem. In a period where white America was eager to reconcile the sectional legacy of the Civil War, Vance suggested that an equitable distribution of the southern black population throughout the United States would correspondingly bolster white supremacy throughout the nation.\(^{81}\)

In remarks on Butler’s bill on January 30, 1890, Vance said he could not support the bill as a foreign deportation program. He thought too few African Americans would voluntarily agree to deportation, and he acknowledged the impossibility of forcibly carrying out such a movement. Yet he was committed to solving the race problem in a way that would diminish the social and political power of black Americans. “Their presence among us,” he declared, “of course, I regret.” So in place of foreign deportation, Vance suggested “that it is perfectly

\(^{80}\) *Proceedings and Debates*, 51 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 419.

practical to induce these people to settle in the various States of this Union which now have few or no colored people. There is ample room for them throughout the Northern and Northwestern States, each one of which could receive enough to relieve entirely the pressure upon those States in the South…and yet not inconveniently interfere with the well-being of any Northern State.”

This was quite a change for a politician who had argued, ten years prior, that black emigration from the South would both ruin the South’s economy and harm black people by putting them in an insalubrious climate and an oversupplied labor market. It is also significant that Vance, who was a prominent southern leader, advocated for neither foreign deportation nor domestic territorialization as solutions to the race problem. Indeed, his ideas of how distribution would work were quite developed. He suggested that similar inducements as were held out to foreign immigrants should be offered to black southerners, too, which in ten years’ time, he thought, would lead to a significant enough movement to “equalize the condition of all the States.” With the black population spread across the nation, there would be no need for sectional legislation that aimed to reform the South. “The introduction of large numbers of the colored race into every Northern state would be equivalent to an amendment to the Constitution,” Vance told his Republican colleagues. And “would restrain you effectively from the passage of any laws or attempting any kind of interference that would discriminate between the States of the American Union.”

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82 *Proceedings and Debates*, 51 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 970.
83 Vance one of three authors of the majority opinion of the Vorhees committee, which argued that the 1879 Exodus would take black southerners “to a colder and more inhospitable climate, [and] thrust them into competition with a different system of labor, among strangers who are not accustomed to them, their ways, habits of thought and action, their idiosyncrasies, and their feelings.” Vance pursued lines of questioning with white midwestern witnesses intended to show that the North and Midwest were no place for black southerners. See *Senate Report*, part 1, pp. vii and part 2, pp. 419–21.
84 *Proceedings and Debates*, 51 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 970.
Despite their apparent alignment with the ideas of Windom, Rapier, Bruce, and other Republican and black leaders, however, Vance’s ideas of population distribution were more cynical. “I think our Northern friends who so glibly undertake to settle the negro question,” he stated, “have yet to make the acquaintance of the negro himself.” Vance argued that northern Republicans only chastised the white South for its treatment of African Americans because they lived in places without black populations. If distribution could nationalize the race problem, Vance suggested, it would solve the sectional problem by exposing northern hypocrisy and uniting the nation around white supremacy. He concluded, “If the negro is a good thing, let us divide him up. There is plenty of him to go around.” This remark was met with laughter in the Senate chamber.85

Vance’s comments were enough to get Butler to recast his bill as an explicit distribution scheme. Butler, somewhat puzzlingly given its language, denied that his bill aimed at “removal” or “deportation” of black Americans. Praising Vance’s speech (and obviously desiring the support of such an influential senator), Butler claimed his bill proposed “the voluntary movement or removal on the part of certain of the colored population in certain of the Southern States where they predominate to other States where they do not exist in such numbers. That was the main object of my bill.”86 Whether he originally intended it to or not, Butler’s bill represented a significant iteration of discussion of population distribution in the Senate, and the idea circulated widely in 1890.

Ultimately, Butler’s bill did not pass the Senate. It lacked support even among his fellow southern Democrats and was vehemently opposed by northern Republicans. Senators George Frisbie Hoar, John James Ingalls, and William H. Blair, all Republicans who had all supported

85 Proceedings and Debates, 51 Cong., 1 Sess., pp. 969, 970.
86 Proceedings and Debates, 51 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 971.
Windom’s resolution ten years before, did not support Butler’s plan. Though Butler and Windom ostensibly aimed at similar programs of population distribution, they did so for different reasons and in different political atmospheres. Windom had been able to use an ongoing, grassroots movement among African Americans to show support for his scheme; Butler, despite the scattered support of black leaders, could not capitalize on a similar migratory movement. Though Butler’s bill failed in the Senate, it succeeded in perpetuating the idea that population distribution could alleviate pressing problems of national concern, such as the race and southern problems, which contributed substantially to postwar sectionalism.

During the same winter the Senate was discussing Butler’s bill, an important civil rights convention was meeting in Chicago. That convention, held under the auspices of the newly formed Afro-American League, was the result of three years of public relations and organizational work on the part of T. Thomas Fortune, a prominent black journalist. The convention drew more than a hundred delegates from twenty-three states and issued a list of six grievances focusing on voting rights, antilynching, education, criminal justice, and discrimination in transportation and accommodations. Aimed at combating the rising tide of Jim Crow, the Afro-American League in convention committed itself to a nonpartisan struggle for equal rights.87

Addressing the audience as temporary chairman, Fortune reminded the convention that it had taken a half century of antislavery agitation before the advent of emancipation, and that the fight for equal rights in America would take at least as long. “We have undertaken no child’s play” he declared. “We have undertaken a serious work which will tax and exhaust the best

intelligence of the race for the next century.”

Shaped around a long-term project of social change, the league’s constitution, adopted January 1890, advocated “a more equal distribution of the colored population throughout the country.”

The league established branch organizations in a number of states, but it was already struggling to maintain funding and organization by 1891. Two years later it disbanded, but it likely helped advance ideas of population distribution in that time. Such ideas also received support in black literature in 1890. That year, Octavia Victoria Rogers Albert, who had been born enslaved in Georgia in 1853, published *The House of Bondage*, which recounted her experiences of slavery and emancipation and discussed racial progress in the Reconstruction era. Albert included, near the end of her book, a conversation with a “Colonel Douglass Wilson, a colored man of considerable prominence, not only in Louisiana, but in the nation.”

The conversation took stock of national race relations and questioned “whether…it is necessary for us to emigrate to Africa or to be colonized somewhere, or what.” The colonel remarked that he had “no faith in any general emigration or colonization scheme for our people. The thing is impracticable and undesirable.” He did not favor such colonization whether within or without the United States. “I do not think we ought to ever want to get into any territory to

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88 T. Thomas Fortune, “Why We Organize a National Afro-American League,” *Afro-American Budget*, 1 (Feb. 1890), p. 240. J. Willis Menard had initially opposed Fortune’s plans for organizing the league. Menard thought it would only exacerbate racial tensions without providing any benefits. He eventually came to support the effort, however, and, though it does not appear that Menard attended the convention, the league echoed Menard’s advice from the year before.


90 Octavia Victoria Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage, or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, Original and Life Like, As They Appeared in Their Old Plantation and City Slave Life; Together with Pen-Pictures of the Peculiar Institution, with Sights and Insights into Their New Relations as Freedmen, Freemen, and Citizens* (New York, 1890), p. 129.
ourselves, with the white people all to one side of us or around us. That’s the way they got the Indians, you remember, and we know too well what became of them.\textsuperscript{91}

Yet migration did factor into the colonel’s suggestions for his race. In denying a racial geography that would limit black freedom to particular domestic localities or lead to a separation of white and black Americans, Wilson told Albert that “My plan is for us to stay right in this country with the white people, and to be so scattered in and among them that they can’t hurt one of us without hurting some of their own number….God’s plan seems to be to pattern this country after heaven. He is bringing here all nations, kindreds, and tongues of people and mixing them into one homogeneous whole; and I do not believe we should seek to frustrate his plan by any vain attempts to colonize ourselves in any corner to ourselves.” Like James T. Rapier had when defending the Exodus, Wilson argued that internal colonization would weaken the position of African Americans within the body politic. Banding together, to put it in Rapier’s terms, was not a solution Wilson endorsed. Albert did not comment on Colonel Wilson’s plan, so her own feelings toward population distribution were not made explicit. But her inclusion of this conversation toward the end of a work published in 1890 was likely a response to the competing visions of the Butler bill.\textsuperscript{92} Albert’s book presented domestic population distribution as an alternative to either internal colonization or foreign emigration, and it suggested that the success or failure of racial integration was closely tied to the disposition of the population nationally.

\textsuperscript{91} Albert, \textit{The House of Bondage}, pp. 144-46. Reference to the history of Native American was common in antiemigration rhetoric. Those who favored integration opposed foreign and domestic colonization proposals because they saw them as akin to reservations, a way to maintain white control over black people by restricting them to specific locales. The \textit{Southwestern Christian Advocate}, in 1890, suggested, “The diffusion of the race throughout the country would perhaps materially assist in the solution. But the race should ever remember the red man’s history in this country, and never ask to be set apart to one side, with the white man behind or around him with his Winchester.” “Stay in America, Diffused Everywhere,” \textit{Southwestern Christian Advocate}, Dec. 4, 1890, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{92} Albert, \textit{The House of Bondage}, pp. 146-47.
Wilson’s plan indicates an important shift in emphasis of the logic behind ideas of population distribution. Where Republican politicians had primarily pointed toward their desire to secure black citizenship and solve the national race and sectional problems, and Democratic politicians had looked to limit grounds for federal intervention in southern state affairs (thus fixing the sectional problem, too), black intellectuals in the 1890s advocated that distribution could solve deeper issues of the postwar nation, namely, the creation of a truly integrated citizenry. As Wilson’s hope for “one homogenous whole” suggested, black leaders in the 1890s discussed the ways a program of migration aimed at a national distribution of the southern black population could demographically transform the body politic into a pluralistic society. Thus black activists and intellectuals shaped population distribution into a radical platform of multiracial social engineering between 1890 and the early 1900s. This widening conversation began in the context of Butler’s bill, ran through the revived Afro-American Council (which succeeded the 1890 league), found institutional expression in an interracial sociological conference in the early 1900s, and reached its most developed and utopian ideals in Kelly Miller, black mathematician and dean of Howard University.

Prior to Miller’s transnational and radical formulation of population distribution, however, William Sanders Scarborough became the idea’s most prominent black advocate in the early Jim Crow era. Scarborough, though born enslaved in Georgia, received a clandestine education and, when emancipation came, excelled in the local Macon schools. From there Scarborough went to Atlanta University before earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees in classical languages from Oberlin College. Scarborough became a prominent scholar. He was the first black man to publish a Greek textbook for American college students, and he was among the first African American members of the American Philological Association. Scarborough’s
institutional home was Wilberforce University, where over the course of almost four decades, he served as a professor, vice president, and, eventually, president.93

In 1878 Scarborough wrote an article for the *Christian Recorder* opposing African emigration. The article commented on the early stirrings of the Exodus in South Carolina, which, at that point, was aimed at Liberia, not Kansas. Scarborough thought this plan a mistake. To those who had sold their homes and stock to raise money for the move, Scarborough counseled, “buy them back if possible.” If conditions were unhappy in South Carolina, Scarborough suggested, “seek homes in the great west of the land that gave us birth.” Like others, he argued that domestic migration was a better solution than foreign emigration. Scarborough thought that rather than fund a system of deportation, Congress should appropriate funds to purchase black homesteads in the West, “that the Negro may wend his way thither, build up and utilize the hitherto barren country.” Echoing Gibbs’s philosophy of migration and the development of natural abundance as a foundation for integration, Scarborough wrote that westward migration might lead to “forgetting color, race, or condition[,] only to rise above it.” Though not yet using the explicit language he would eventually, Scarborough was suggesting, in 1878, that freedpeople’s settlement across the West would attenuate racial distinctions in the nation.94

A decade later, Scarborough began to speak more explicitly of population distribution. In March 1889 he wrote an article considering “the future of the Negro.” He was less sanguine than he had been in 1878, and diagnosed white supremacy as the nation’s problem. Black people, he argued, were “suspended between a selfish, arrogant, and superstitious South, and a vacillating,

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over-sympathetic North.” Scarborough saw reconciliation, rather than sectionalism, as the reason for the race problem. While the South pursued a policy of fraud, intimidation, and outright violence to “make freedom a mockery and life simply a terrorized existence,” the North was “divided between its desire to have right and justice meted out to the long-suffering subject race and its wish to deal fairly and magnanimously with its Anglo-Saxon brothers of the South.” The result was oppression in the South and inaction in the North. He considered a few solutions to the problem, such as enforcement of black voting rights, a repeal of the fifteenth amendment, or some scheme to split the black vote equally between the Republican and Democratic parties. None of these, he thought, was practical. Instead Scarborough suggested leaving the South for the “West, where other Americans are turning.” Such a demographic shift in the nation would, in the long run, settle race relations. He cautioned that

this removal must be a voluntary one, and it should not be en masse, but gradual. I do not mean by this that the Negro should colonize; far from it. His leaders know that colonization would be his death-knell. The isolation of any race as a distinctive people in one large solid body in any one part of a country means retrogression. In this case it would in time become an imperium in imperio.95

As Butler’s bill entered the discussion later that year, Scarborough began to apply similar logic to the existing disposition of the southern black population. If colonization in the West would be bad, so was de facto internal colonization in the South vis-à-vis demographic concentration.

In October 1890 Scarborough offered the only black perspective in a wide-ranging discussion of “the race problem” in the Arena. He responded to articles by southern Democrats, including senators Morgan and Wade Hampton. Hampton, who had supported the deportation schemes in the Senate that year, argued that removing the southern black population and resettling it in Africa offered the best solution to the race problem. If that should prove

impossible, then he suggested domestic distribution as an alternative. Hampton’s logic mirrored
the remarks of Senator Vance. If deportation failed, wrote Hampton, “I should wish to see them
scattered over the whole country, so that each State of our Union could have the benefit of their
presence, or learn by actual experience how baleful an influence they exercise, wherever they
take part in determining the policy of our great Republic.” Hampton, too, thought distribution
would aid the reconciliation of white America by uniting North and South around white
supremacy. He hoped that, by putting a black presence into largely white areas of the North,
population distribution would eventually get everyone on board with a plan of deportation.
Hampton wanted the United States to be a white man’s country.

Scarborough’s response recognized the racism of both sections. He argued that
“American prejudice is now almost greater than the negro can bear,—North as well as South.
There is very little difference as to quantity.” Yet he denied that “the deportation of the entire
race of color is the only alternative by which we may hope for solution of this most vexed
question.” Citing particularly Butler’s bill and the support of “Senators Hampton, Butler, Eustis,
Morgan, Colquit, and other Southern statesmen,” Scarborough called instead for “common
understanding between the two races.” Scarborough, moreover, argued that separatism in the
form of “colonization of any kind meant death to the negro.” He aimed instead at integration. In
this suggestion, Scarborough saw population distribution as a component of a Washingtonian
plan of economic uplift. He counseled “patience” on the part of African Americans: “the negro
should make the most of his opportunities, winning respect and confidence by his intellectual
and moral attainments and his financial worth.” He knew a demographic approach to race
relations would need time to work out: “A scattering of the population over these United States,
would, in my opinion, do him untold good within the next twenty-five years.” Only when such a
distribution failed, wrote Scarborough, would he “favor migration as a whole to Africa.”96 Contra Hampton’s hope that distribution was prelude to deportation, Scarborough saw it as a precondition for integration.

Scarborough added his name and support to the revival of the Afro-American League, now called the Afro-American Council, in 1898. The reborn council, the direct predecessor of the NAACP, still advocated a redistribution of the nation’s black population. In its address to the nation, the Afro-American League in 1898 declared,

We feel that a more general distribution of the Afro-American race throughout the States of the Union and the new territories of the Republic, in order to reduce the congested population of the Southern States, would do much to simplify the race problem in these States, and we urge that such distribution should be encouraged in all reasonable ways. We have no sympathy whatever with the schemes of those who wish to have the race leave the United States for foreign countries. We shall remain here and fight out our destiny in the land of our fathers.97

The league thus put into institutional form what Scarborough, Menard, Rapier and others had been suggesting for more than a decade. Rather than being anti-migration, the league took an official stance that simultaneously denounced foreign emigration while endorsing domestic population distribution. The league suggested that a different demographic geography for the nation might secure a more just society.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, black intellectuals and their white allies turned population distribution into a radical suggestion for the creation of a truly interracial society. Rather than the cynical hopes of southern Democrats, these thinkers embraced a positive vision of distribution as a form of social engineering. They pushed beyond the more modest aims of Windom and his supporters. Rather than solving the sectional issue or reducing racial antagonism, turn-of-the-century proponents of population distribution claimed it as the basis for

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a more just society where race would no longer function as either a marker of difference or a criterion for belonging.

A remarkable conference considered the issue of population distribution in 1903. The conference was a meeting of the National Sociological Society, an organization of intellectuals aimed at finding solutions to “the race problem.” The society was composed of black and white members from the North and South—some more radical, some more conservative—and was formed around the idea that, “the relation of master and servant being removed, the principle of equality before the law must take its place.” The society met for four days in November 1903 in Washington, D.C., and ranged widely in discussing the reasons for and solutions to the race problem. “Distribution among the States” was scheduled for discussion in the conference’s agenda, and the issue was most often considered as a refutation of internal or foreign colonization and as a preferable demographic disposition to the current concentration of the black population in the South.

Spatial segregation and population distribution were set against each other as competing solutions at the conference. Bishop Lucius H. Holsey of the Christian Methodist Episcopal church presented a paper advocating “race segregation” as the proper solution to the race problem, by which he meant the formal setting aside of a domestic territory for exclusive habitation by African Americans. His plan called for the federal government to create a separate territory in the West (he suggested Indian Territory or New Mexico) which would be peopled gradually and in a noncompulsory manner by black southerners. White people would be denied

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99 It is worth noting here that W. E. B. Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folks was published earlier this same year (1903); in it, Du Bois paints a dismal picture of the black belt as isolated and backward, a discussion taken up in the following chapter.
citizenship in this proposed state or territory. Holsey’s proposal was hotly contested, and population distribution was suggested instead.

Many of those who opposed geographical segregation pointed to the history of Native Americans, as had Colonel Douglass Wilson in Octavia Albert’s *The House of Bondage*. “The history of the Indian on American soil, should satisfy us that segregation is not practical, to say the least, under our form of government,” argued Walter H. Brooks in response to Holsey, for instance. As soon as useful resources were discovered in the proposed black territory, said Brooks, the inviolability of the territory would be destroyed, and the black citizens would again find themselves hemmed in and marginalized. A better solution, he thought, was “that a part of the colored people should leave the overcrowded sections of the South” and disperse themselves more generally in the nation. “[L]et us not cease to live and move and have our being *in the midst* of the other people of this country,” he warned. Harvey Johnson leveled a similar critique at Holsey’s plan. He asked: “The Indian was segregated without his will; did they let him alone? Shall we be in peace if we are segregated?” He suggested that demographic concentration amounted to spatial segregation in the South, and that continuing and deepening such a policy would not solve the problem of race in America. “I think we are pretty well segregated as it is,” he replied to Holsey.

Indeed, the idea of the black belt stood for many as a harbinger of what spatial segregation would mean. Roscoe Conkling Bruce admitted he felt “no interest in Bishop Holsey’s romancing. The problem that actually confronts us is (1) that Negro population has in fact already segregated in considerable black belts, and (2) that, unless the germs of self-efficiency already discoverable in those belts are nourished, Haitian conditions may appear on

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100 *How to Solve the Race Problem*, p. 59. Emphasis in original.
American soil.” He suggested, though in the paternalistic formulation that black people did better when they had the example of white people to follow, that conditions were better where black demographic majorities were not so concentrated. Bruce stopped short of suggesting distribution as a solution, preferring instead the Tuskegee approach to uplifting the black belt.102

His comments were followed by those of George F. Bragg, who did suggest distribution as an alternative to concentration in the cotton South. For Bragg, the black belt was a socio-spatial construct rather than a geographical region, and one that could be created anywhere. It was also one to be avoided, he thought. The alternative to black belts, according to Bragg, was a demographic configuration that would attenuate racial distinctions. “They can be guided northward and southward and won’t make black belts, but scatter themselves in white communities,” Bragg argued. “Just in proportion as a few colored people scatter here and there, they gather up the light of the community and are lost sight of. The trouble is, that they get together in a black belt.”103 Bragg, like many others, suggested that even the de facto segregation wrought by the southern racial geography worked to accentuate racial distinctions in the nation; conversely, a scattering or distribution of the black belt’s population would lead to such distinctions being “lost sight of.”

Population distribution received its most thorough recommendation at the 1903 conference from George H. White, also a prominent member of the Afro-American Council, who had represented North Carolina’s second congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1897 to 1901. White disagreed with Bishop Holsey’s program of segregation. His plan, he said, was “a systematic thinning out of the congested sections of the

101 How to Solve the Race Problem, pp. 63-4.
102 This topic is taken up in the following chapter.
103 How to Solve the Race Problem, p. 64.
South, known as the Black Belt…by a healthy transfer of the colored people from these states, to the North, East and West.” So distributed, he hoped, African Americans would more easily integrate into the body politic and racial distinction would lose its political importance. Whereas internal colonization would heighten racial divisions, a population distribution would achieve the opposite. White hoped a dispersed migration of a portion of the black population out of the South would lead to “los[ing] them among other races of our republic.”

White admitted he did not have a full vision of how such a movement could work, but, in an echo of the way the Exodus had blended small-scale colonization with hopes of population distribution, he suggested prominent black leaders should buy tracts of land in the “Northern, Eastern and Western sections of our country, and there establish small colonies, and thus pave the way for the home getting by our less fortunate brothers in the South.” Temporary separatism in dispersed black colonies would, according to White, facilitate an eventual integration. “The gravity of our present situation is worth the experiment,” he concluded. “I hope to see it tried.”

His recommendation was endorsed by two subsequent speakers. John Green noted that “colonies of Negroes…. are distributed all over the Buckeye State.” He suggested what had been achieved there could be replicated on a broader scale. Reuben Smith agreed and made an explicit reference to the population distribution vision of the 1879 Exodus. “I endorse the remarks favoring the distribution in northern and western States,” he stated. “There should be distribution. Twenty-five years ago we took interest in this very thing. I was a member of an exodus society. We had some of these white men with us. That exodus society caused several thousand people to leave North Carolina and go to Indiana….I believe in distribution, and I know it would help us,” he told

104 How to Solve the Race Problem, p. 130.
105 How to Solve the Race Problem, p. 130.
the conference. Thus in 1903 the memory of the Exodus continued to fuel ideas of population distribution as a solution to national problems of race relations.

Kelly Miller, also a member of the Afro-American Council and corresponding secretary for the National Sociological Conference, opposed the call for distribution in 1903. He, like Roscoe Conkling Bruce, favored the Tuskegee approach. Miller responded to those who suggested distribution at the conference: “The Negro shows no disposition to scatter himself out promiscuously…. I deny the statement of the congested condition of the population of the South,” he said. Rather than encourage African Americans to leave the South for the North or West, Miller declared, “It ought to go in the other direction.” Miller held out hope that demographic concentration—strength in numbers—still offered the best solution for a regional approach to black freedom. Echoing Booker T. Washington’s anti-emigration stance, Miller counseled, “We want to encourage people to let down buckets where they are and not be running to and fro.” Ideas of population distribution swirled through the 1903 conference as an alternative to either colonization proposals or the existing racial geography, but Kelly Miller was not ready to endorse such ideas.

Miller eventually came to embrace the radical implications of population distribution, however. He was born free in South Carolina in 1863, the son of a Confederate soldier and a former slave. He took to education and attended Howard University in the early 1880s, where he studied Greek, Latin, mathematics, and sociology. Miller became the first black graduate student to attend Johns Hopkins University, though he left it in 1889 without a degree. Miller became a professor at Howard, teaching mathematics and sociology, and eventually earned a master’s degree in mathematics and a law degree from Howard. Miller was also active in the black

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106 *How to Solve the Race Problem*, p. 133.
intellectual and political community: he was a prominent member of the National Sociological Society and the American Negro Academy and edited the *Crisis* alongside W. E. B. Du Bois.

In 1914, Miller collected, edited, and republished a series of articles he had written over the previous few years. He called the collection *Out of the House of Bondage*, and in it, he presented a vision of a globally blended human population made possible by distributed migration and interracial sex. Miller argued in one chapter, for instance, that “perpetual attrition of races must ultimately wear away all distinction and result in a universal blend.” He was not sure this would happen within his lifetime, however. “It must be conceded that the quickest solution of the American race problem,” Miller wrote, “would be the immediate physical absorption of the negro element in[to] the white race….but this is not possible, due to the universal attitude of the dominant race toward miscegenation.”

Further confounding this possible solution to the race problem, in Miller’s analysis, was the spatial segregation wrought by the racial geography. “In the Southern states, where they reside in the greatest numbers, the black belts are growing blacker and the white communities are growing whiter….Illicit relationship will decrease in proportion to the separation of the areas of domicile.”

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107 Miller, “The Physical Destiny of the American Negro,” in *Out of the House of Bondage* (New York, 1914), p. 45. Miller argued that, while white men were not averse the actual act of interracial sex, they had long constructed legal and social systems that associated the progeny of such unions with the nonwhite parent. Miller’s nod here to the “impossibility” of such an outcome, however, was not his usual stance; Miller held out hope that interracial sex could break down systems of segregation. Historian Natalie J. Ring, for instance, notes that “Overall, many social scientists agreed with Miller that two races living side-by-side in the same geographical and spatial areas would invariably turn to ‘amalgamation’ or ‘race blending’ and that no artificial boundaries could keep them apart.” Natalie J. Ring, *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880–1930* (Athens, Ga., and London, 2012), p. 194. Ikuko Asaka argues that sexual politics shaped Republican ideas of internal colonization in the “tropical South.” A focus of such colonization schemes, in Asaka’s view, was physical separation of black women and white men (their former owners, specifically) to reduce the possibility of interracial sex. Miller recognized that demographic concentration as de facto colonization had achieved the same end, and he suggested that a population distribution would also increase sexual contact between white and black Americans. See Ikuko Asaka, *Tropical Freedom: Climate, Settler Colonialism, and Black Exclusion in the Age of Emancipation* (Durham and London, 2017), pp. 187-88.

concluded this essay with a prediction that in the next century, a new race would emerge in the United States, neither white nor black.

In a subsequent chapter, Miller explored the problem of the standing demographic geography. In considering “the American Negro as a political factor,” Miller focused on the challenge of “govern[ing]…a heterogeneous population,” especially the idea that special federal laws would apply to only certain states or to only certain races or classes. A nation that claims democracy on a basis of equality, Miller argued, can sustain no such particularist laws; he recognized the demographic concentration of the black population in the states of the South as the root of the problem. “The unequal density of distribution [of the black population] complicates the political question. If there were territorial compactness of this racial element, or if it were equally diffused throughout the whole area, the problem in its political aspect would be greatly simplified.” Despite a nod toward colonization (“territorial compactness”), Miller clearly thought distribution the better option. He wrote, “if the negro were equally distributed among the States he would not constitute more than one-eighth of the strength of any community, and there would scarcely be any necessity for special political plans or policies to cover his case. As a political factor he would be absorbed in the general equation.” In this formulation, Miller looked to population distribution as a way of solving challenges to democratic republican governance through population management. Removing the South’s black majorities would equalize conditions in the nation. “Democratic institutions can no more tolerate a double political status than two standards of ethics or discrepant units of weight and measure,” he warned.109

109 Miller, “The American Negro as a Political Factor,” in Out of the House of Bondage, pp. 134-35. Miller had begun discussing the problem of demographic concentration in 1905, only two years after arguing in favor of concentration at the National Sociological Conference. At the Eighth Annual Meeting of the American Negro Academy in 1905, Miller presented a paper on “Migration and Distribution of the Negro Population as Effecting Negro Suffrage Conditions.” In it, he argued that “Population lies at the basis of all human problems,” and that “From the foundation of our government the Negro has constituted a serious political problem, mainly because of his unequal geographical distribution.” He noted that black emigration from the South had been slow-moving and
A theme was thus emerging in Miller’s book: the presence of large black populations in the South posed a problem for American democracy and was perpetuating racial distinctions and antagonisms. Population distribution offered a solution to these problems, and Miller fleshed out a radical vision of distribution in his concluding essay, “The Ultimate Race Problem.” In this essay, Miller assumed that migration would in time achieve a distribution of the black population, and that, once such distribution came to pass, the color line would be obliterated. “A caste system must be like a pyramid,” according to Miller, with “each layer representing a broader area than the one resting upon it. It is impossible to form a lasting system of caste with a superincumbence [sic] of ten white men upon the substratum of one negro.”\(^{110}\)

Exploitation and oppression of black Americans would only occur as long as demographic concentration persisted.

But Miller suggested that global trends were making such concentration less likely; technology was facilitating a worldwide population shift. “Steam and electricity have annihilated distance and banished the terrors of the deep,” he wrote; “preventive and remedial medicine has neutralized the baneful influence of climate, and checked the ravage of disease; the hardship of pioneer life is lessened by the easy transportation of material comforts….We may naturally expect that less and less heed will be paid to the fixity of the bounds of habitation of the various races and nations.”\(^{111}\) And returning to his earlier argument, Miller wrote that the long-term result of interracial sex would “bring about a closer and closer approachment [sic] between the two types, until all social restrictions would be removed upon the disappearance of the ethnic

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difference upon which it rests."¹¹² Though Miller remained concerned that demographic concentration in the black belt would frustrate interracial relationships, his global and long-term perspective in this essay pointed toward a future when populations blended, borders became less important, and racial distinctions gradually disappeared.

In concluding his essay, Miller hoped that all people would come to “more fully appreciate than we do now that God has made of one blood all nations to dwell upon the face of the earth, without assignable bounds of habitation. Whether this will be but a stage in the ultimate blending of all races in a common type transcends all our present data, and must be left to the play of the imagination.”¹¹³ But Miller had a powerful antiracist imagination, and his essay capped off three decades of discussion of the problem of demographic concentration and the promise of population distribution in a vision of a modern world without racial divisions. Miller’s was a global vision of a blended population made possible by technology and immigration, and it rejected any claims to place based on the criteria of race, climate, labor, or political borders.

Ultimately, like many formulations of population distribution in the Reconstruction era, Miller’s global utopia was a rejection of any racial geography, and it mapped a radical belonging in the Jim Crow era. Published just as the Great Migration began, Miller’s essay envisioned the most optimistic version of what the Great Migration could have been: a mass movement out the South that truly, by changing place and population, rewrote the terms of belonging in the United States. Miller’s vision failed in reality, and black southerners moved north only to face racism and spatial segregation (on the scale of city rather than region) there, too. Nonetheless, Miller’s vision emerged from decades of discussion and debate about population distribution and

¹¹³ Miller, “The Ultimate Race Problem,” p. 239.
reflected important ideas about the overlap of geography, demography, and citizenship in the Reconstruction era. In hoping to solve a national problem of race relations, proponents of population distribution suggested black southerners had to forgo local belonging and regional identity to better secure national belonging. They viewed the problem as one of population, not of individuals, and used this notion to imagine a truly national vision of belonging. Fixing the race problem, they thought, required a systematic change of place.

In the end, despite three decades of overlapping ideas and rationales promoted by northern Republicans, southern Democrats, and national black leaders, no effective or widely embraced programs to reorder the U.S. population emerged. The motives of the various parties never really overlapped, and everyone who considered the proposition recognized the enormity of the task were the federal government or private organizations to undertake any scheme of distribution.

Eventually deeming the distribution idea impractical or even harmful, African American cultural and political leaders contested the notion that local belonging did not matter. In response to decades of both actual migration and discussion and agitation about various emigration schemes, these leaders critiqued migration, promoted southern development, and laid claim to black belonging in the South. Unconvinced that demographic concentration was a problem, but also unwilling to concede that black belonging in the U.S. South was rightfully based on racialized ideas of place and labor, these leaders held out hope that development of the black belt offered the best solution to the creation of a more just society in the United States. Becoming an integral part of the national body politic, they thought, required a regional identity.
CHAPTER 5
“The South is Really Our Home”
Migration, Literature, and the Search for Belonging in the Jim Crow South

The history of postwar migration helped shape a cultural emphasis on the South as home. So did the broad discussions of racial geography and population distribution. The successful intra-South migration of thousands of freedpeople, and the advertisement of that idea by prominent leaders such as Mifflin Gibbs, laid the foundation for a widely shared black southern identity. White observers tried to essentialize that migration through appeals to racist beliefs about climate and labor to propose that the South was the “natural” and proper place for African Americans. But the racist belief in climatic suitability did not envision true black belonging in the South; it proposed instead that black people belonged in the South, but not that it belonged to them. Moreover, those who feared the so-called Africanization of the South saw devolution in the process. Intra-South migration’s production of a black South, they thought, portended a return to “barbarism” and a fall from “civilization.” Conversely, advocates of population distribution thought that rejecting a regional belonging would help black people become more fully American. They also thought that removing the South’s black population would make the region less distinct. Emigration would solve both the “Negro question” and the “southern problem,” but it would also entail displacement.

Many black southerners rejected both the essentialized racial geography and the suggestion that becoming more American meant giving up their southern homes. The simultaneous embrace of intra-South migration and the rejection of population distribution contributed, around the turn of the century, to a cultural project of constructing an identity as black southerners. Put another way, postwar migration helped shaped a sense of place and a
sense of regional belonging. This project was expressed most prominently in the career of Booker T. Washington, who championed black belonging in the South while advocating for a regional system of reform and uplift. Washington opposed out-of-the-South migration, but he celebrated the career of Gibbs and, like him, emphasized the existing opportunities to be found in southern resources, lands, and industries. Washington’s emphasis on the South as home worked its way into African American literature, and black writers attempted to reconcile the reality of emigration as a response to Jim Crow injustice with a Washingtonian message of black belonging in the South. Migration as a plot element gave authors a way to explore the tension between mobility and regional belonging, or rootedness. By constructing stories in which black emigrants return to their southern homes after having migrated to the North, black writers argued for black belonging in the South. They also reckoned with ideas of progress and modernity, questioning, centrally, whether the South was a site of progress and how the “New Negro” could be reconciled with, and made an equal part of, the New South. To pursue these themes, this chapter turns to works by Sutton E. Griggs, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and W. E. B. Du Bois, published between 1899 and 1911.

Importantly, these writers did not use ideas of climate- or labor-related constitutional suitability to lay claim to black belonging in the South. They rejected the essentialized racial geography to propose instead a geography of belonging based on historical association with, ancestry within, and identity derived from the rural South. Indeed, the writers explored here had a connection with Washington or his program of sectional reform, and their works, like Washington, rejected emigration as a solution to the so-called race problem. This same period, however, saw Washington and Du Bois grow further and further apart, as they came to represent two opposed ideologies of uplift and reform. But while Du Bois certainly found fault with
aspects of Washington’s model of industrial education, and Washington certainly resented Du Bois’s criticism and growing popularity, their stance toward emigration was not as divergent as may be assumed. This chapter joins a recent historiographical trend that bucks the image of Washington and Du Bois as representatives of dichotomous and irreconcilable ideologies; Du Bois’s 1911 novel reflected ideas that had been central to Washington’s antiemigration, pro-South message.1

I argue in this chapter that the included writers and thinkers, rather than proposing a program of changing place through migration to new locales, pushed for a change of place through reform and activism. They sought to transform the South through making space and belonging for black people within it, rather than by changing the region’s demographic and racial geography. These works, then, attempted to reconcile migration and belonging by placing hope in a Washingtonian program of reform and development in the New South. That message resonated in print culture beyond literature, and the final section of this chapter turns to the biography of Scott Bond, published in 1917, to explore the construction of black southern belonging in contemporary nonfiction.

These literary and activist efforts to construct African Americans as *southerners* and the South as *home* were increasingly positioned against the emergence of the Great Migration and the accompanying anti-South rhetoric of northern black newspapers, such as the Chicago

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1 Robert Levine points out the problems of reducing leaders to binary opposites, suggesting that such simplistic notions reduce their complexity and reflect more a need for contemporaries to see leaders as representative of competing ideologies than it reflects leaders’ actual disagreement. “The idea of male generational binarism seems especially crucial to African American thought,” writes Levine, and he has no time for it. Robert S. Levine, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity (Chapel Hill, 1997), p. 5. For recent reinterpretations of the split between Du Bois and Washington, which also see little relevancy in making the two binary opposites even as they point to their actual public and private rift, see Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2009) and Thomas Aiello, *The Battle for the Souls of Black Folk: W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and the Debate That Shaped the Course of Civil Rights* (Santa Barbara and Denver, 2016).
Defender. In that sense, then, the writers and works explored in this chapter—and the ideas of belonging and identity they professed—help explain and illustrate the reasoning and motivations of those who stayed behind in the South while their kith and kin migrated to northern urban centers in the early twentieth century. As emigration became an ever more important aspect of black political action, staying put became an ever more fraught and contested decision. The bulk of the historical literature on black migration emphasizes the complex decision making, and the courage, of those who sought out new homes; while certainly accurate, this interpretation suggests that those who stayed behind were passively acquiescent to the continuing disenfranchisement and racial violence that prevailed then and later in the South. The implicit question becomes, if migration represented a rational response to oppression and lack of opportunity in the South, why did so many remain in the region? The ideas explored in this chapter offer an answer: those who did not choose to migrate were not necessarily passive recipients of a fate beyond their control. Many chose, instead, to make their home in the South, and to make the South their home. This chapter argues therefore that opposing emigration and placing hope in the South represented as significant a project of place-making and as complex a search for belonging as did migration. Indeed, the two elements can only be understood in relation to each other. Staying put should be considered as great a factor as any other in the “continuum” of black migration recently proposed by historian Kendra Taira Field.²

² Field suggests that we reconfigure our understandings of African American emigration to focus less on distinct migrations and more on the overlapping and continuous experience of movement in postemancipation black life. Her own work shows the links between domestic migration and subsequent foreign emigration, which, she posits, reflect “a continuum of flight.” Indeed, as both Field’s work and chapter 1 of this dissertation demonstrate, many freedpeople experienced multiple migratory events in their search for home and belonging. I argue, however, that deciding to not migrate—to stay put—should factor into that continuum; staying put often required as much decision making as did migration, even if it is less reflected in the sources and in the historiography. Kendra Taira Field, Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War (New Haven, 2018), p. 137.
Black southerners had reason to be hopeful that they could make the South their home in the late nineteenth century: their rising leader was a son of the region who preached a gospel of southern prosperity. Indeed, by remaining in the South, African Americans were enacting Booker T. Washington’s imperative to cast down their buckets where they were—his address at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition in 1895 affirmed a commitment to black belonging in the South and called on African Americans to remain in the section. Washington, in fact, began that address by remarking on the nation’s racial geography, anchoring his overall message in the demographic reality that “One-third of the population of the South is of the Negro race. No enterprise seeking the material, civil, or moral welfare of this section can disregard this element of the population.”

Just five years before, Senator Butler and others had discussed redistributing that same population, projecting ideas of a New South created in the absence of a significant black population. Washington, however, argued for a vision of southern progress that relied on the presence of black southerners. He exhorted white southerners to embrace black labor, and he told black southerners to “cast down their buckets” by remaining in the South.

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4 Du Bois, who eventually coined the term “Atlanta Compromise” to castigate Washington’s conciliatory message, was initially very supportive of BTW’s 1895 address. The Cotton States Exposition, following the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, aimed to advertise the industrial and commercial growth and opportunity of the U.S. South and was a primary component of the “New South” ideology, which stressed development and modern management of the “Negro Question” through the emerging system of Jim Crow de jure segregation; the exposition featured a “Negro Building” and highlighted black success even while circumscribing black inclusion. Washington’s speech accepted the majority vision of the New South by telling black Americans to work hard and patiently in southern development while acquiescing to the Jim Crow system by eschewing political agitation. But while white listeners heard what they wanted to hear in Washington’s speech, black participants in the exposition, Washington included, were presenting their own visions of black belonging. Though relegated to a separate space within the Exposition, black southerners used the event to display the tenets of the “New Negro,” “educated and well versed in the newest techniques of agriculture and industry.” According to historian Nathan Cardon, Washington and other black leaders at the Exposition “located the future of African Americans as a separate and vibrant race rooted in the South.” Such a geographically anchored vision of black modernity stood in direct contrast with the back-to-Africa ideology of Henry McNeal Turner or the population distribution schemes explored in the previous chapter. Nathan Cardon, “The South’s ‘New Negroes’ and African American Visions of Progress at the Atlanta and Nashville International Expositions, 1895–1897,” Journal of Southern History, 80.2 (May 2014), p. 289.
rather than by hoping to “better their condition in a foreign land.”  

His Atlanta speech thus rejected colonization and distribution as solutions to the “race problem.”  

As Washington would argue repeatedly, black labor had made the South prosperous, and that prosperity was the key to black belonging in the region, or, put another way, the South needed black people, and black people needed the South.

Washington said as much at an 1888 address at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. “The South,” he told the mostly black audience, “has been purchased and paid for ten times over by the sweat and blood of our forefathers. Their two hundred and fifty years of forced and unrequited toil, secured for us an inheritance which at no late day we are going to occupy and enjoy as independent and intelligent citizens.”  

For Washington, the “Black Belt of Alabama,” where he built Tuskegee Institute and where he did his most active local outreach work, was the “heart of the South,” and he urged the audience to commit to working to uplift what he termed the “Negro South.”  

Foreshadowing his 1895 Atlanta speech, Washington called on the graduates of Lincoln University to help work out the southern race problem from within. This message was one he stuck to: African Americans needed to identify their interests with the South. They needed, he argued, to embrace the region and their place in it.

Washington built this message into the platform of the Tuskegee Institute. A series of resolutions authored during a 1892 conference at the institute, for instance, posited that “we believe we can become prosperous, intelligent and independent where we are, and discourage any efforts at wholesale emigration, recognizing that our home is to be in the South.”  

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6 Norrell, Up from History, p. 124.
7 Quoted in Aiello, The Battle for the Souls of Black Folk, pp. 11-12.
Washington, it was not so much that he thought emigration was a false policy because he questioned the choice of destination. It was instead that his understanding of southern lands, resources, and economies made the section the place of greatest opportunity for black Americans. In 1903, Washington explicitly opposed the efforts of “The Northern, Eastern, and Western Immigration Society,” whose purpose was to “depopulate the South of its colored inhabitants” and “distribute them all over New England.”\textsuperscript{10} He not only opposed colonization movements to particular locations, but also less directed movements meant to distribute the black population elsewhere. He wrote that he was “opposed to the diffusion and dissemination of the Negro throughout the North and Northwest” because he believed “that the Southern section of the country where the Negro now resides is the best place for him.”\textsuperscript{11}

In such passages, examples of which span his career, Washington constructed the South as a distinct region onto which he then mapped black belonging. The South, for Washington, was a rural region substantially different from other sections of the United States. Washington’s South was agricultural but undeveloped; black southerners could use both of those factors to create their place in the body politic. Embracing an agrarian morality, Washington argued that uplift and advancement for African Americans needed nature and agriculture as their material foundation. And since black people had been doing agricultural labor in the South for hundreds of years, they were the best laborers for the region. “Agriculture is, or has been, the basic industry of nearly every race or nation that has succeeded,” Washington wrote in 1899. “The Negro got a knowledge of this during slavery. Hence, in a large measure, he is in possession of this industry in the South to-day.”\textsuperscript{12} Since the South was agricultural, and since freedpeople and

\textsuperscript{10} Montgomery Advertiser, June 10, 1903, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{11} BTW Papers, vol. 1, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{12} Booker T. Washington, The Future of the American Negro (Boston, 1899), p. 222. Washington, like Mifflin Gibbs, saw the undeveloped resources of the South as central to black progress: “In a material sense the South is still
their children were agricultural people, the South, for Washington, was where they belonged, in both the prescriptive and descriptive senses.¹³

Conversely, according to Washington’s moral geography, cities were corrupting places where black people could not compete for jobs and so fell into vice. “Now, since the bulk of our people already have a foundation in agriculture, they are at their best when living in the country, engaged in agricultural pursuits.” In large cities, Washington wrote, black people “[do] not succeed so well.” It was, indeed, a “point of great danger for the coloured man” that the North, and its cities, held “numerous temptations… He has more ways in which he can spend money than in the South, but fewer avenues of employment are open to him… [which] tends to discourage and demoralise the strongest who go from the South, and to make them an easy prey to temptation.”¹⁴ All cities, even southern ones, were generally the wrong place for black people, Washington believed. He praised black southerners’ relationship with “nature,” and he thought severing the connection through rural-to-urban migration was a fool’s errand. “In my work at Tuskegee and in what I have endeavored to accomplish in writing and speaking before the public, I have always found it important to stick to nature as closely as possible, and the same policy should be followed with a race.” Rural life, for Washington, offered the best education, the best way to advance. He advocated “follow[ing] the plan of getting away from the town and its artificial surroundings and getting back to the country…. Many of these seemingly ignorant

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people [rural black southerners], while not educated in the way that we consider education, have in reality a very high form of education—that which they have gotten out of contact with nature.”

Given what he perceived as the suitability of the South and the moral danger of the North, Washington charted a course for “the future of the American Negro” that envisaged spatial and social belonging in the U.S. South. Black labor would develop the region, and African Americans would secure their place in the body politic while the New South rose in material and economic might. “In the future, more than in the past, we want to impress upon the Negro the importance of identifying himself more closely with the interests of the South,—the importance of making himself part of the South and at home in it.” Washington’s plan of economic uplift proclaimed a central place for black Americans in the development of southern resources and in the harvesting of southern crops. “The Negro in the South has it within his power, if he properly utilises the forces at hand, to make himself such a valuable factor in the life of the South that he will not have to seek privileges, they will be freely conferred upon him.”

Thus a crucial element of Washington’s program revolved around a place-making effort to

15 Washington, “The Economic Development of the Negro Race since its Emancipation,” in The Negro in the South, pp. 51-2. Ironically, the New Orleans Times-Picayune interpreted Washington’s own actions and movements, rather than his words, as an impetus to black emigration from the South. Reporting in 1901 on the meeting between Washington and President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House, the Times-Picayune suggested “the notoriety of the Booker Washington incident will ‘exert great influence in causing the migration of Southern negroes northward.’...The Picayune has long held that the only reliable solution of the race problem in the Southern States is to hasten the dispersion of the blacks among the population of the Northern States, so that they shall not have preponderating numbers in any section....if it should turn out that this result is accomplished though President Roosevelt and his particular notions of social relations of the race, his Booker Washington dinner will prove to be one of the greatest blessings that could come upon the country.” Similarly, reporting on Washington’s stay in a hotel in Saratoga Springs, New York, where Washington was escorted by a white man, the Picayune suggested the respect shown Washington was “a most potential stimulus” for the “northward movement of the negroes.” There may be something to this—Washington’s own social and spatial mobility was a symbol not always in line with his advice to black southerners. See Times-Picayune, quoted in Portland Morning Oregonian, October 28, 1901, p. 4 and Times-Picayune, August 16, 1905, p. 6.


transform the South into the rightful, and perhaps only, home for black Americans. Washington embraced the South and placed black belonging within it, and in so doing he became the foremost proponent of the idea that the “Race problem” must be worked out within the nation’s extant demographic geography. “Primarily,” said Washington at an address on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Tuskegee Institute, “I believe that my race has found itself, as far as its permanent location is concerned. As far as I can interpret the present ambitions and activities of my people, the main body of the race has decided to remain permanently in the heart of the South or near what is known as the ‘black belt.’”

The same year that Washington laid out his comprehensive vision of southern belonging in *The Future of the American Negro*, Sutton E. Griggs authored a work of fiction that likewise embraced the South as home and eschewed ideas of emigration and distribution as solutions to the race problem. Like Washington, Griggs himself embraced the South. He was born in Texas in 1872, was educated in Virginia, and made his career in Tennessee before returning to Texas, where he died in Houston in 1933. Throughout his career, Griggs ministered to local black congregations and strove to get his works into the hands of black southerners—he formed his own publishing company, funded the printing of his books, and sold them door to door. He wrote about, and for, black southerners. The South was Griggs’s chosen home, and he worked hard to craft a cultural and political message of why it was the rightful home of African Americans in general. He aimed that message at black southerners, and his first work of fiction, *Imperium in Imperio* (hereafter referred to as *Imperium*), was didactic in tone, aiming both to explore race relations and to offer some solutions. (Significantly, despite being a work of fiction, *Imperium* carries the subtitle “A Study of the Negro Race Problem.”)

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*Imperium* advocates for consistent, though patient, collective action among black southerners; it also rejects ideas of emigrationism or population distribution to stake a firm claim to the South as a region that belongs, by the weight of history, to black people. Griggs thus constructed both the south as *home* and black people as *southerners* in his novel; both constructions presented an image of African American modernity in the Jim Crow South.

*Imperium* tells the story of Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave coming of age in the Reconstruction South, their encounters with racism, and their eventual leadership of a secret organization headquartered in Texas and aimed at solving the “race problem,” one way or another.²⁰ Belton is the main, as well as the more sympathetic, character. The book opens in Virginia in 1867, with Belton, age eight, and Bernard, nine, attending school for the first time; they excel in school and become rivals. They are pitted against each other in an oratorical competition at the school’s commencement ceremony. Belton is the superior orator, but Bernard, because he is the son of a white man and has lighter skin that Belton, wins the prize. Bernard then goes off to Harvard. Belton, possessing fewer resources, goes to the fictional Stowe University, in Nashville, Tennessee, where he begins to agitate for black equality.

At Stowe, Belton leads a protest against the majority-white faculty’s practice of making the only black faculty member (who is the university’s vice president) eat with the students rather than with other white teachers. Belton forms a secret society on campus, whose password is “Equality or Death.”²¹ The organization becomes a lesson in collective action. Griggs wrote, “During slavery all combinations of slaves were sedulously guarded against, and a fear of combinations seems to have been injected into the Negro’s very blood.” Belton’s efforts take his

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²⁰ According to Arlene Elder, Griggs’s protagonists “have names beginning with the same letters because Griggs conceives of them not so much as individuals but as alter egos, symbols of the opposing impulses.” Arlene Elder, *The “Hindered Hand”: Cultural Implications of Early African American Fiction* (Westport, Conn., 1978), p. 101.

fellow students by surprise, but they are “eager for action.” The students petition the faculty and, when that fails, stand in silent protest with signs that read “Equality or Death.” They prevail, and Belton gets his “first taste of rebellion.”

Bernard, meanwhile, had graduated as class president and valedictorian at Harvard and has fallen under the influence and guidance of a white senator who reveals himself to be Bernard’s father and who promises Bernard an eight-million-dollar inheritance and implores him to return to Virginia and work his way into politics. The father decries the “infernal race prejudice” that stopped him from being able to raise Bernard as his son, and he makes it Bernard’s mission “to break down this prejudice.” Bernard thus moves to Norfolk, Virginia, where he becomes a lawyer and congressman.

Both men face challenges from the South’s system of black subordination. Belton cannot find employment— the higher professions are closed to him due to his skin color, and he has no training in trades or skilled labor. Belton and his wife slip toward poverty. When she inexplicably gives birth to a shockingly white baby, Belton suspects infidelity and leaves for Louisiana, where he hopes to teach at a school for black pupils. Along the way he commits “to give his life wholly to the righting of the wrongs of his people.” Bernard, too, has a romance made unhappy by the weight of race. He plans to marry Viola, but she breaks off their engagement because she is convinced by false racial science that the offspring of mixed-race parents will degenerate. Viola takes her own life, leaving Bernard a task: “If miscegenation is in reality destroying us, dedicate your soul to the work of separating the white and colored races. Do not let them intermingle. Erect moral barriers to separate them. If you fail in this, make the

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22 Griggs, Imperium in Imperio, p. 22.
23 Griggs, Imperium in Imperio, p. 45.
separation physical; lead our people from this accursed land.”

Educated and radicalized by their encounters with racism, Belton and Bernard are poised to become prominent leaders.

The story finds the two reunited near Waco, Texas, at the fictional Jefferson College, where Belton has organized a secret society dedicated to “protect[ing] the negro in his rights.” It is an ambitious society. Formed because of a “flaw or defect in the Constitution of the United States” regarding the “relation of the General Government to the individual state,” the organization seeks to provide the local protection that the federal government cannot. Since the Slaughterhouse cases in 1873 limited the scope of the Fourteenth Amendment, the federal government could not secure local protection for black southerners. So the society is revealed to be a shadow government aimed at correcting this constitutional flaw, which had made African Americans into citizens of a sovereign nation that was unable to act when “Ku Klux, White Cappers, Bulldozers, [and] Lynchers” wrought violence on southern black communities. Dubbed the “Imperium In Imperio,” the antigovernment has a treasury of five hundred million dollars and represents seven million two hundred fifty thousand citizens.

Bernard assumes presidency of the Imperium. During the Spanish American War, the Imperium, and the novel, arrive at their defining moment. As the United States prepares for a war that will use black troops to secure Cuban independence, news reaches Waco about the murder of Felix A. Cook, a black postmaster in Lake City, South Carolina, and congressman of the Imperium. Upset that U.S. power can be projected abroad but not at home to protect its own citizens, Bernard calls on the Imperium to “strike a blow for freedom.”

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24 Griggs, Imperium in Imperio, p. 56.
25 Griggs, Imperium in Imperio, p. 62.
One congressman proposes a plan of diffusion and race-mixing, advocating a policy to build a racially homogeneous body politic. Another suggests “emigration to the African Congo Free State,” either pushing the Belgians out or purchasing the colony outright with the Imperium’s treasury. A third member proposes race war. Belton, the congress’s speaker of the house, takes the floor and gives a speech laying claim to the South as black people’s home while advocating a system of collective action and gradual intra-South migration. Having learned from his protest at Stowe University that white power could crumble in the face of black solidarity, Belton wants the Imperium to reveal itself, which will alert white people that “each individual negro does not stand by himself….that we have arrived at the stage of development as a people.”

Public in their unity, black southerners should, Belton argues, “emigrate in a body to the State of Texas, broad in domain, rich in soil and salubrious in climate. Having an unquestioned majority of votes we shall secure possession of the State government.” Belton thus proposes a plan of demographic concentration in the South, complete with appeals to climate, and echoing the postwar intra-South comparative geography of soil fertility and resource abundance. Belton envisions black belonging as geographically bounded within the South but not separated from the United States—he wants regional demographic concentration to secure national belonging through a reformed federal system.27

Griggs’s Imperium in a “hemispheric context” and situates his study of race relations in the southwestern borderlands to highlight “the rich, overlapping contexts, regions, and locales from which Griggs’s text also derives its shape and meaning.” Levander focuses on Griggs’s Texas not as a stand-in for the South but rather as a unique, transnational and borderland region whose fluidity made it possible to imagine it as a nascent black empire. I do not dispute Levander’s premise, but I instead argue that Griggs rejected that imagined space as a utopian alternative; by rejecting the liminality of Texas as a black empire, Griggs emphasized black belonging in the South. See Caroline Levander, “Sutton Griggs and the Borderlands of Empire,” in Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs, ed. by Tess Chakkalakal and Kenneth W. Warren (Athens, Ga., and London, 2013), pp. 21-48.

27 Recounting the many different versions of relocation and deportation ideas discussed in the 1890s, some of which are covered in the previous chapter, John Gruesser suggests that, “In Imperium Griggs responds to the era’s many emigration schemes, some of which were at least as far-fetched as his own Texas-takeover scenario. His fictional vision of a black-run Texas serves in part to highlight the impracticality if not the downright absurdity of actual proposals” to remove African Americans from the United States and the southern region. John Gruesser, “Empires
But Belton’s vision does not prevail. Bernard instead leads the Imperium to a plan of insurrection and war, proposing an armed takeover of Texas and an alliance with the United States’ enemies. Texas, in Bernard’s scheme, would then become a black “empire,” while Louisiana would be given to the Imperium’s allies. In contrast to Belton’s plan of regional belonging but national integration, Bernard advocates a militant, separatist movement. Belton cannot reconcile himself to Bernard’s plans. Dubbed a traitor to the Imperium, Belton is executed. But Bernard is unsuccessful, too. The narrative is presented to the reader as the words of Berl Trout, an Imperium defector who has exposed the scheme in order to stop it.28

Griggs thus laid out and then denied many of the commonly proposed solutions to the southern race problem, including emigration from and war with the United States, migration to achieve a demographic concentration in a particular southern state, and diffusion and race-blending. Significantly, Griggs positioned against each other the protagonists’ two methods of creating all-black spaces, one within and one without the United States, both of which envisioned a form of migration-as-colonization. Instead, in Belton’s denunciation of Bernard’s bloody separatist vision, Griggs espoused a commitment to the South, to the United States, and to the idea that the race problem must be worked out largely within the existing demographic geography.

Belton presents a “defence [sic] of the south”: “On her soil I was born; on her bosom I was reared; and into her arms I hope to fall at death.”29 Indeed, Griggs argued for a version of

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28 The same year that Griggs published his novel denying either concentration or emigration as solutions to the race problem, Booker T. Washington published an article in The Atlantic centering his comments on the demographic reality of the South, as he did when opening his address at the Cotton States exposition in 1895. Washington noted that the number of African Americans in the South “effectively dispenses all plans for the settlement of the negro problem by deportation of the colored people, or their collection into a single state or territory.” Cleveland, Ohio, Plain Dealer, October 29, 1899, p. 4. Washington and Griggs both worked against ideas of population distribution or foreign colonization, affirming, instead, that the race problem had to be worked out within the South.

29 Griggs, Imperium in Imperio, p. 72.
southern modernity in *Imperium*, projecting an image of a “New Negro” who was vital to the interests of a “New South.” Themes of education, industry, and leadership run throughout the novel, reproducing many of Booker T. Washington’s ideals, though employing the imaginative space of literature to advocate those ideals on a more accelerated, less conciliatory schedule. Before Belton calls for emigration to Texas, he suggests that, having revealed the power of the Imperium as a mechanism of unity and collective action, black southerners should “spend four years in endeavors to impress the Anglo-Saxon that he has a New Negro on his hands and must surrender what belongs to him.”

What belongs to him, in part, is the South as a *home*. Moreover, this “New Negro,” Griggs explained, was necessary for the development of a “New South, the South that, in the providence of God, is yet to be.” This yet-to-be South “could not have been formed in the womb of time had it not been for [postwar black] schools.” Griggs thus advocated for a hope in the South, especially hope that the so-called New Negro—educated, assertive, organized—could be an integral part of the New South’s social and economic progress. Griggs echoed Washington’s regional program, as well as the intra-South pro-emigration ideas of William H. Grey and Mifflin W. Gibbs, by suggesting that steady work, the accumulation of property, the development of southern resources and industries, and consistent protest against racism and oppression would eventually combine to earn African Americans social belonging in the region where their labor and history had already earned them spatial and spiritual belonging.

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30 Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio*, p. 77. Gabriel A. Briggs argues that Griggs’s “New Negro” is “an inherently *southern* figure, one developed under the suffocating and oppressive conditions of the reconstructed South.” The New Negro is thus a product of the New South, suggesting that black modernity arrives not through flight to the urban North but through the conditions inherent in the Jim Crow South. Gabriel A. Briggs, “*Imperium in Imperio*: Sutton E. Griggs and the New Negro of the South,” *Southern Quarterly* 45.3 (April 2008), p. 155.
Griggs rejected migration as a solution to the race problem to argue that African American modernity lay in the South, and that southern, and thus national, modernity itself required a black presence in the region. Of course, by presenting a “study of the Negro race problem,” Griggs recognized that Jim Crow society limited African Americans’ legal claims to belonging in the South and that, therefore, there was a strong and consistent emigration impetus among the population he wrote for. In constructing a fiction of black belonging in the South, Griggs acknowledged the racist violence, disenfranchisement, and economic oppression black southerners faced. As Griggs put it in Imperium, black people were “unprotected foreigner[s] in [their] own home.” For black southern readers, then, the book’s message disputed ideas of emigration while offering an image of a troubled, tenuous belonging, but it held out hope for the future of the South, where Griggs, too, had chosen to stay.

Indeed, later in life, Griggs took a stand for the South and for rurality as the foundations of black life. In a remarkable pamphlet written during the height of the Great Migration, Griggs

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31 Griggs, Imperium in Imperio, p. 59. Griggs’s critique of national constitutional belonging, secured via the Fourteenth Amendment but abrogated by individual states because black people were denied local, civic belonging, was a theme he expanded on in 1929. Exploring the “basis of hope for the Negro in the South,” Griggs lamented that federal law made black southerners into citizens but that that law was unenforceable locally, producing a situation where black people were denied civic and political rights, and left exposed to white racist violence, by the state and local governments in the South. National belonging via citizenship, Griggs suggested, meant little if it did not secure local social belonging. His 1929 pamphlet thus advocated for federal legislation to create mechanisms to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; it also advocated, in Washingtonian language, that black southerners find allies among progressive white southerners and work out their problems locally. “If the American people tell us that we must win our home states,” Griggs declared, “let the shout go back from the ten millions of Negroes of the South, we can and we will.” Griggs, “Basis of Hope for the Negro in the South,” (Memphis: The National Public Welfare League, 1929), p. 31. (This is document held in the University of Mississippi, J. D. Williams Library, Department of Archives and Special Collections. Special thanks to Andrew Marion for photographing it for me.)


33 This pamphlet of Griggs’s is undated. It is similar in message and theme to his 1929 pamphlet cited above, and it likely was published within a couple of years of the 1929 pamphlet. Without a date, however, it is impossible to say whether Griggs’s embrace of the rural South was influenced by the Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand: The South and Agrarian Tradition (1930). But importantly, while Griggs did oppose large-scale black migration to cities, he did not oppose urbanity, and in contrast to the conservative, agrarian message of I’ll Take My Stand, Griggs presented rural life as the basis of black modernity and progress.
opposed emigration, pointed to problems of northern and urban living, and re-centered the rural South as the economic and spiritual home of African Americans, while calling for uplift and reform in the section. Griggs presented Memphis, Tennessee, as a sort of capital city of the black South: “the commercial capital of a thousand miles of some of the most fertile soil of the world and…within a day’s or night’s ride of more than 3,500,000 Negroes, who can be stimulated for the greatest forward movement of Negroes along substantial lines that the modern world has known.”\textsuperscript{34} The black commercial capital that Griggs envisioned, and particularly its fertile-soiled hinterland, had been built by the streams of intra-South migration that brought freedpeople from the eastern and upper South to the Mississippi-Yazoo and Arkansas deltas.\textsuperscript{35}

Echoing Imperium’s call for collective action, Griggs argued that those who advocated fleeing the South (and he singled out the Chicago Defender here) ignored “the economic outlook due to the assembling of so many Negroes near each other.”\textsuperscript{36} Griggs opposed any “policy of wholesale emigration involving sections and people.”\textsuperscript{37} He did not criticize any individual migrants, and in fact admitted that “The Negro race stands in need of a strong, healthy, progressive city life.” But Griggs maintained that the rural South must provide the basis for black

\textsuperscript{34} Sutton E. Griggs, “The Negro and the South” (Memphis: The National Public Welfare League, n.d., but likely issued in the 1920s), unpaginated. (This document is held in the University of Mississippi, J. D. Williams Library, Department of Archives and Special Collections. Special thanks to Andrew Marion for photographing it for me.)


\textsuperscript{36} For the role of Chicago Defender in denouncing the South and encouraging the Great Migration, see Ethan Michaeli, \textit{The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America: From the Age of the Pullman Porters to the Age of Obama} (Boston and New York, 2016), esp. chaps. 3 and 4; see also ); Isabell Wilkerson, \textit{The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration} (New York, 2010).

\textsuperscript{37} He did, however, countenance intra-South migration, writing that “There are now large areas in the South where the fundamental needs of the Negro are being met,” though black people in some areas faced higher levels of violence and economic stagnation. Griggs suggested that “the wise policy is not to flee from rural regions altogether, but to flee from the unjust to the just landlord.” Moreover, in sticking close to the language Arkansas’s pre-emigration black leaders had used, Griggs aimed his message at “those who by nature love the soil and prefer to seek from the bosom of nature the economic strength so badly needed by the Negro race in its mighty efforts to take its place among the great races of mankind.” The rural South, Griggs argued, as he had in Imperium, was the place of black modernity. Griggs, “The Negro and the South,” n.p.
life in America—it was the region with the greatest economic promise and the region where, by right of labor, occupation, and history, African Americans could lay the greatest claim to belonging. He concluded,

Let us, therefore, continue to make rural life so just, so profitable, so attractive in every way that the Negro people may not have the mind to abandon rural life altogether. The evident purpose of millions of Negroes to hold the South as a possible home for the Negro race, and the efforts of leaders who remain with them for the purpose of helping to better their condition and move things forward toward the ideals of justice, should be [affirmed].

Onward, in spite of temporary reverses, stunning defeats—onward, ever onward, in the truest and surest way to the highest heights in all parts of America, should be the slogan of all Negroes, and in this great determination each should be for all, and all for each.\(^{38}\)

Despite being written more than two decades after *Imperium*, this pamphlet summarized many of the arguments Griggs worked out in dramatic form in his 1899 novel. He did not attempt to downplay or ignore the problems of life in the South. Instead, facing them, he counseled collective action, long-term agitation, and the need for spatial belonging. Hope, home, and modernity were in the South, according to Griggs, and there, too, should African Americans reside.

Compared with Sutton Griggs, Paul Laurence Dunbar’s relationship with the South was more complicated. He contributed consciously to the literary movement of identifying the South as the “home” of African Americans, and his writings constructed both the South as a region and African Americans as southerners. Dunbar lived and wrote in Ohio, was born after the days of slavery, and never spent long in the South, however. Critics have noted Dunbar’s detachment from the South—they have also suggested Dunbar’s depictions of enslaved and freed people were flat and simplistic because Dunbar knew few formerly enslaved people in his own life.\(^{39}\)

Yet Dunbar was born in Kentucky in 1872, the son of former slaves who told him about slave life, and he lived in Ohio, a state just north of Dixie and full of former slaves. Moreover, Dunbar


\(^{39}\) For discussion of Dunbar’s relationship with the South, including those critical of Dunbar’s southernness, see William M. Ramsey, “Dunbar’s Dixie,” *Southern Literary Journal* 32.1 (Fall 1999), pp. 30-45.
followed events in the South and thought and wrote about the “southern” and “race” problems often. Like Griggs, Dunbar presented emigration from the South as compounding the race problem rather than solving it.

Dunbar’s antiemigration stance can appear self-serving and paternalistic at times, however, such as in his 1898 column in the Columbus, Ohio, *Dispatch*, in which he complained about “the crowds of idle, shiftless Negroes that throng [the Tenderloin district of New York]….Many [of whom] are from the small towns of the South.” In this piece, Dunbar bemoaned that so many black southerners were moving north, “giving up the fields for the gutter.” Yet his concern was only partly for the southern immigrants who found themselves facing vice and debauchery in the northern city; it was also that the presence of unkempt, uneducated, and vice-prone black people was threatening the respectability of middle-class black northerners like himself. Dunbar wrote that the northern black elite’s “influence for good and for respectability cannot be fully felt as long as so large a part of the race are operating in a different direction.” He suggested that the media, and white observers overall, took ten times more interest in black vice and wrongdoing than they did in stories of industry, modesty, and sobriety. Black southerners flocking to northern cities, Dunbar warned, threatened the politics of uplift and the project of integration.40

But Dunbar was an ally of Booker T. Washington, and he too saw promise in the South and supported the idea of uplifting the black belt from within.41 For Dunbar, it was not only that the North was corrupting, but also that the South was a necessary proving ground for a race working its way into progress and modernity. Dunbar’s column on the Tenderloin district ended

41 Dunbar wrote the “Tuskegee Song” in 1902, which praised the institute as the “pride of the swift growing South.” Dunbar also visited Tuskegee in 1901, where he did some readings and participated in some literature classes. See the BTW Papers, vol. 6, pp. 403-04, 60.
with a recommendation that black southerners “stay close to nature’s heart for a while
longer….felling the forest, tilling the field, and singing in their cabin doors at night.” Learn to
lead a sober, industrious agrarian life before joining the fray of “a hard and intricate civilization,”
Dunbar admonished. Like a kiln, the southern heat would forge black southerners into a
hardened people ready to compete and thrive in modern metropolises. But not yet. Dunbar
concluded with a paternalistic message: “stay upon the farm and learn to live in God’s great
kindergarten for his simple children.”

Though his tone was condescending, Dunbar echoed Washington’s idyllic advice about the importance of maintaining a close relationship to nature, which Dunbar, too, viewed as most possible in the South.

Despite his dubious motivations in the 1898 column, however, Dunbar developed an
image of the South as home for black southerners, and portrayed the North as an engine of
corruption. In his view, migration, especially from the South, led to degradation and ruin, and
rootedness, especially within the South, led to maturity and uplift. Dunbar’s moral geography of
the turn-of-the-century United States thus painted the North as a place of vice and degradation,
and his fiction provided didactic tales instructing African Americans to stay in the South. Dunbar
refined this message principally with the short story “Silas Jackson” (1900) and the novel The
Sport of the Gods (1902).

“Silas Jackson,” published as part of the collection The Strength of Gideon and Other
Stories (1900), tells the story of the titular character’s series of migrations from the countryside
of Virginia to a large southern city (“the Springs”) to New York and finally back to his former
rural home. It is not a happy or hopeful story, and it carries within it a cautionary tale for African
Americans about the dangers of leaving the South. At the beginning of the story, Silas Jackson is

42 “The Negroes of the Tenderloin,” Columbus, Ohio, Dispatch, December 19, 1898.
offered a job at a fancy hotel. Suddenly able to imagine a broader world and a more cosmopolitan life, Silas finds his isolated, rural life confining and oppressive. “The farm looked narrow to him, the cabin meaner, and the clods were harder to his feet. He learned to hate the plough that he had followed before in dumb content, and there was no longer joy in the woods he knew and loved.”

His agrarian innocence gone, Silas moves to the Springs, where his job as a hotel porter gets him noticed for his singing ability. Jackson’s vice is that of pride—an inflated sense of his own ability and destiny leads him to put on airs when offered a job with a traveling company out of New York. As Silas tours and performs, he picks up more and more “elegancies and vices” and comes “to be known at the clubs.” Dunbar suggested the combination of overwork and alcohol-fueled late nights spent in amorous pursuits leave Silas a ruined man. “The hot breath of the city had touched and scorched him, and had dried up within in him whatever was good and fresh,” wrote Dunbar. “The pity of it was, he was proud of himself, and utterly unconscious of his own degradation.”

Fired from his company, which had begun rehearsing an opera while Silas is run down and sick, and abandoned by his sweetheart, Silas Jackson finds himself lost and alone and a long way from home. But he has learned a lesson about leaving the South. “The hollowness of his life all came suddenly before him. All his false ideals crumbled, and he lay there with nothing to hope for. Then came back the yearnings for home, for the cabin and the fields, and there was no disgust in his memory of them.”

Silas Jackson learns to love his southern home by leaving it. When, young and naïve, he learns of a distant place and opportunity, Silas realizes the shortcomings of his native home.

Knowledge of somewhere else helps Silas critique his locale. “He began to see that the cabin was not over clean, and for the first time recognized that his brothers and sisters were positively dirty….he suddenly developed the capacity for disgust.” But the pursuit of distant opportunity leaves Silas worse off than staying put would have. He is no longer naïve, but he is not improved. Silas has been changed by his experience, and the conclusion is ambiguous about whether he can make a happy life after returning home. The story ends with Silas “spent, broken, hopeless, all contentment and simplicity gone…turn[ing] his face toward his native fields.”

Dunbar did not paint a happy image of life in the Jim Crow South: Silas’s rural life is one of isolation, backwardness, and dirt, and Silas encounters racism when he moves to the Springs. But Dunbar did not pair his critique of the South with a suggestion to leave it, as Henry Adams’s colonization council had in the 1870s. Exposing the problems of the South and the futility of migration, Dunbar implied that change must come from within.

Dunbar did not give the events of “Silas Jackson” a date, but given references to newer types of black music and to “relics of the old days of negro minstrelsy,” it likely falls somewhere between 1890 and 1900. Dunbar noted changing ideas of migration and urbanity in the story. Silas’s father, of the emancipation generation and recalling the displacement of wartime and the many thousands of freedpeople who moved about in the 1870s and 1880s, protests that Silas should stay put, since that is what had worked for him. The elder Jackson warns, “Of co’se ef you wants to go, Silas, I ain’t a-gwine to gainsay you, an’ I hope it’s all right, but sence freedom dis hyeah piece o’groun’s been good enough fu’ me, an’ I reckon you mought a’got erlong on

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49 Indeed, Dunbar’s depiction of life in the rural South shares much with Du Bois’s depiction of the black belt in *The Souls of Black Folk*, discussed below.
50 This chronology of African American musical types is drawn from Sandra Jean Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry* (Urbana and other cities, 2018).
it.” Likewise, “old Hiram Jones” tells Silas he has heard “it’s powahful wicked up in dem big cities.” Silas is undeterred by either man. He tells his father “It’s diff’ent now…all I wanted was a chanst.” And he tells Hiram, “Oh, I reckon I ain’t a-goin’ to do nuffin wrong.” Silas, of course, is wrong on both counts: he would have found it better to stay put, and he does much that is “wrong” in New York. “Silas Jackson” thus used an unsuccessful—ruinous, even—example of migration to argue that black people belong in the rural South.

Dunbar further developed that idea with The Sport of the Gods (hereafter SOTG), which tells the story of the Hamilton family’s fall from grace, migration to New York, and subsequent return to the South. The Hamiltons, headed by father Berry and mother Hattie, work as butler and housekeeper, respectively, to the Oakleys, a wealthy white planter family in an unnamed southern town. The Hamiltons are good at their jobs and have secured their place with the Oakleys, who are well-off and highly respected members of the local white elite. On the night of a dinner party, Maurice Oakley’s brother, on a visit home from Paris, reports $500 missing from his room. Berry is accused of having stolen the money, and the revelation that he has a significant amount of money in the bank is proof enough: Berry is sentenced to fifteen years hard labor. Hattie is subsequently turned out by the Oakleys, and the Hamiltons’ children, Joe and Kittie, likewise lose their positions. The white and black communities of the unnamed southern town shun the company of Hattie, Joe, and Kittie, who decide to move to New York to escape the ostracism. “They had heard of New York as a place vague and far away, a city that, like Heaven, to them had existed by faith alone.”

52 Dunbar, “Silas Jackson,” pp. 346-47. For Dunbar and others, the South was understood as a rural region—that, in fact, was its most important redemptive quality and its primary marker of identity. Dunbar thus adopted the use of dialect as a “way of praising rural folk life,” according to literary scholar William M. Ramsey. Dialect signified both rural simplicity and southern origins in Dunbar’s work. See Ramsey, “Dunbar’s Dixie,” p. 34.
Hattie, Joe, and Kittie struggle to settle into life in New York. Hattie is defensive of her children, viewing the city and its inhabitants as threats. Joe, in his late teens, is eager to become a man about town; Kittie is unsure of herself and overwhelmed. Hattie’s vision proves prophetic: New York completes the process of destroying the Hamiltons that began when a racist criminal justice system incarcerated the innocent Berry. Joe becomes an alcoholic and a murderer, Kittie a show girl, and Hattie incorrectly believes her marriage to Berry annulled and remarries, thus committing adultery and bigamy. While the three Hamiltons in New York fall victim to vice, Berry is released from prison after a newspaper reporter (who befriends Joe in New York) discovers that Maurice Oakley’s brother lied about the money being stolen. Berry makes his way to New York where he learns that Joe is in prison for life and that Hattie has remarried. Berry plans to kill Hattie’s new husband, but someone else kills the man before Berry can commit the act. With Berry’s innocence intact, Berry and Hattie, now reunited, decide to return to their southern home (Kittie, however, remains on tour with a troupe). Their homecoming is a somber affair. Dunbar concluded, “It was not happy life, but it was all that was left to them, and they took it up without complaint, for they knew they were powerless against some Will infinitely stronger than their own.”

*SOTG* is a migration narrative and a southern identity piece from the start. Berry is introduced as “one of the many slaves who upon their accession to freedom had not left the South, but had wandered from place to place in their own beloved section, waiting, working, and

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55 Farah Jasmine Griffin defines the migration narrative as a story that “portray[s] the movement of a major character or the text itself from a provincial (not necessarily rural) Southern or Midwestern site (home of the ancestor) to a more cosmopolitan, metropolitan area….Most migration narratives offer a catalyst for leaving the South.” They also, however, position the South as “a place where black blood earns a black birthright to the land, a locus of history, culture, and possible redemption.” Griffin, “Who Set You Flowin’?*: The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York and Oxford, Eng., 1995), pp. 3-5.
struggling to rise with its rehabilitated fortunes.”  

Intra-South migration landed Berry a secure and good-paying job with Maurice Oakley. When Hattie, Joe, and Kittie move to New York, the migration itself becomes a defining event for the family and, for Joe, functions as a rite of passage, as he finds himself “suddenly step[ping] into the place of the man of the family.”  

Dunbar himself did not experience the sort of intra-South migration many freedpeople undertook in the 1870s and 1880s, but aspects of his novel mirror those experiences: The Hamiltons leave home because local ties have been severed. They head to a place that they have heard about but have no concrete knowledge of, and they are both scared and excited by the anonymity of a new place. Later, Hattie remarries only to find that she still has a first husband, an experience many formerly enslaved people had to navigate in the Reconstruction era, as historians Heather Andrea Williams and Tera W. Hunter have recently explained. Finally, their family ties frayed and weakened by their sojourn in a new place and lacking other options, the family returns to their old home.

Overall, the novel suggests that emigration from the South, even under dire circumstances, is not a viable solution to the southern problem. The Hamiltons are made worse off by their flight to the North. Indeed, this is Dunbar’s emphatic lesson in SOTG. Reflecting on the murder Joe commits, Dunbar presents a hypothetical sermonizer saying:

‘Here is another example of the pernicious influence of the city on untrained negroes. Oh, is there no way to keep these people from rushing away from the small villages and country districts of the South up to the cities, where they cannot battle with the terrible forces of a strange and unusual environment? Is there no way to prove to them that woollen-shirted [sic], brown-jeaned simplicity is infinitely better than broad-clothed degradation?’ They wanted to preach to these people that agriculture was better than bad art….They wanted to dare to say that the South has its faults—no one condones them—and its disadvantages, but that even what they suffered from

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these was better than what awaited them in the great alleys of New York. Down there, bodies were restrained, and they chafed; but here the soul would fester, and they would be content.59

This passage distilled Dunbar’s message that the home for African America was in the southern states. Rural simplicity and agriculture, even if accompanied by racist violence, was a better home than the corrupted metropolises of the North. In the South, black people could have a soul—they could be a people.60

Yet Dunbar also recognized that as long as Jim Crow and sharecropping ruled the South, black people would continue to flee from it, and he did not blame them for fleeing. Indeed, SOTG presented a bleak picture of race relations in the turn-of-the-century United States. The South was an inhospitable home, the North a ruinous refuge. Dunbar concluded “that the stream of young negro life would continue to flow up from the South, dashing itself against the hard necessities of the city and breaking like waves against a rock,…[and], until the gods grew tired of their cruel sport, there must still be sacrifices to false ideals and unreal ambitions.”61 In other words, you’re damned if you do, and damned if you don’t. And, as the endings of “Silas Jackson” and SOTG made clear, searching aimlessly for belonging in the North changed people so much that reintegrating into southern life became an impossible task. Sometimes, Dunbar’s stories suggested, migrants failed to find belonging at either end of their journey.

Thus like Griggs’s Imperium, Dunbar’s SOTG suggests the conundrum of migration and rootedness: neither, so far, had produced belonging for African Americans. The Hamiltons leave the South because it is hostile to them, but then the family falls apart in the North. Neither place

60 Dunbar’s simultaneous critiques of migration and of the South encapsulate well Dickson D. Bruce Jr.’s contention that African American writers during the nadir portrayed “powerful contradictions” in black life. Bruce defines the period as one of “tensions and ambiguities that defy systematization; Dunbar asks, leave the South, or love the South?” Bruce, Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877–1915 (Baton Rouge and London, 1989), pp. xi, xii.
offered sanctuary, and migration from one to the other solved no problems. The Hamiltons return south and occupy their old home. They find a glimmer of welcome and spatial belonging, but finding their place in the world has exacted a heavy price and left them worse than they started. Dunbar suggested—at best—an ambiguous ending for the Hamiltons. In this period after the onset of Jim Crow but before the true advent of the Great Migration, Dunbar, like Griggs, understood and dramatically illustrated the complicated relationship of migration and regional belonging in African American life. It is important to note, however, that while Griggs and Washington developed an image of black modernity in the Jim Crow South, Dunbar’s stories presented modernity as a condition located in the urban and industrial North. His southern characters’ encounters with modernity are negative, and they return to their premodern agrarian setting in the South. Despite one reviewer’s judgement that *The Sport of the Gods* was a “novel of the new negro,” Dunbar’s South was not the site of progress and modernity, even if it was the site of belonging.62

These stories carry in them the lesson—the hope—that by finding spatial belonging in the South, black southerners could also change their social place in the body politic. Dunbar and Griggs put into literary form what Booker T. Washington preached and what his Tuskegee Institute practiced. W. E. B. Du Bois, however, is often portrayed as an opponent of Washington and the Tuskegee approach, so his inclusion in this discussion may appear incongruent. Indeed, compared with the literature of Griggs and Dunbar discussed so far, Du Bois’s novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* introduces the idea that migration and rootedness could work together for a better outcome. For Du Bois, in other words, the migration of some could aid the local uplift of others. Writing in 1911, with the beginnings of the Great Migration more apparent than they had

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been a decade before, Du Bois attempted to reconcile his program of academic education as the basis for racial uplift with Washington’s emphasis on the South as the proper place for black Americans. Du Bois presented a vision in which the migration of the few—the talented tenth, perhaps—could aid the uplift of the rest by overcoming the isolation that Du Bois perceived as a hindrance to rural black southern life. Migration forged new information networks, educated black leaders, and shaped an assertive black consciousness. Migration could, for Du Bois, help make the South a true home, which is to say that Du Bois saw a way to combine his approach with Washington’s through the mechanism of migration.

Historian Robert Norrell has suggested that the disagreements between Washington and Du Bois were more apparent than actual. Du Bois had worked closely with Washington, yet Du Bois’s 1903 publication, *The Souls of Black Folk*, denounced Washington and introduced what Norrell calls a “red herring” that Washington was opposed to any form of higher education for African Americans. The two leaders came to be viewed as ideologically opposed race leaders, with the typical, surface-level interpretation painting Washington as a conciliatory assimilationist focused solely on industrial education and Du Bois as an uncompromising integrationist focused on liberal arts education. Certainly, they had their differences, in both ideology and leadership style: Du Bois did not agree with Washington’s conciliatory approach to white southerners, and Washington bristled at any opposition to his leadership and position. The two men moved apart, and attempts at public reconciliation failed. A planned camping trip to West Virginia in 1900, for instance, fell through, and the publication of Du Bois’s negative review of Washington’s *Up from Slavery* that same year signaled the growing rift between the two leaders.63 The visible and

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63 Norrell, in his revisionist biography of Booker T. Washington, complicates the rift between BTW and Du Bois by arguing that their followers, and the press, made more of the differences between the two than can be accounted for by their actual ideological differences. Thomas Aiello, however, focuses on the rift as a serious split in black leadership, and he differs from other scholars in dating the split to the late 1890s, rather than the early 1900s. Aiello
public rift, however, made ideological differences appear more stark—Washington was not steadfast in his opposition to higher education for black people, and Du Bois understood that a conciliatory attitude was pragmatic and often necessary in the Jim Crow South. Both saw the need for uplift within the South, particularly in the region termed the black belt.

In an attempt to heal the widening breech between them, Du Bois and Washington participated in a 1904 conference to reconcile black leadership and ideology. The conference was significant, not because it resolved their dispute, but because, set in an era in which ideas of population distribution had been swirling, the conference produced a resolution confirming black belonging in the South. Indeed, Kelly Miller, who had not yet endorsed a broad and utopian vision of population distribution himself, served as secretary of the conference. The conference’s first plank argued that “the bulk of the Negro race should be encouraged to remain in the South, and especially in those sections where the present physical domination must ultimately bring political and civic equality; and that every effort should be made to uplift and develop them in their present domicile.” In other words, Du Bois and Washington both put their names to a program that aimed at retaining the South’s black population and reforming the region, especially those districts with significant black majorities or concentrated populations (“those sections where the present physical domination must ultimately bring political and civic equality”). On this point at least, Du Bois and Washington could agree: the South was the home of the majority of the African American population, as it would and should remain. They

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differed on how uplift and advocacy should proceed, but they agreed on where those efforts must be focused.

Compared with Washington, however, Du Bois, as a northerner, was more critical of the South. Like Griggs and Dunbar, Du Bois mixed critique of the South with his embrace of it—he studied and explicated the problems that kept black people from feeling at home in the section. To a large extent, his 1903 publication, *The Souls of Black Folk* (hereafter *Souls*), was an exploration of the problems of black life in the South.

In *Souls*, Du Bois repeatedly identified a lack of mobility, and a lack of the information networks and wider vistas mobility made possible, as impediments to black advancement in the South. Isolation, rather than the particular geographical location, was hindering the growth and development of southern black life. “[D]espite compromise, war, and struggle, the Negro is not free. In the backwoods of the Gulf States, for miles and miles, [the black man] may not leave the plantation of his birth.”\(^64\) Du Bois reached this conclusion from teaching and studying in the southern countryside. He spent time in and among rural black communities in Tennessee and Georgia to study the race problem from a sociological perspective. This study informed his essays in *Souls*, which overall presented a bleak view of life in the “black belt.” As a student at Fisk University, Du Bois spent two summers teaching in rural Tennessee; he referred to the community he taught as a “little world…dull and humdrum. The girls looked at the hills in wistful longing, and the boys fretted and haunted Alexandria….a straggling, lazy village.”\(^65\) He blamed the community’s backwardness on its “isolation.” The neighborhood he ministered to, for instance, was “shut out from the world by the forests and the rolling hills.”\(^66\)

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Du Bois saved his most vociferous denunciation of southern black life for his essay, “Of the Black Belt,” which critiqued Georgia, “the geographical focus of our Negro population” and the “center” of the “Negro problem.”67 This area, according to Du Bois, was stagnant, isolated, worn out, and tainted by systems of oppression and the history of enslavement. “There is little beauty in the region,” Du Bois wrote, “only a sort of crude abandon that suggests power,—a naked grandeur, as it were.”68 Slavery had cursed the land and ruined its fertility: “The harder the slaves were driven the more careless and fatal was their farming.”69 If Dunbar’s Silas Jackson had his eyes opened by the opportunity to leave his dirty cabin, Du Bois’s black belt residents were still blinded to, and by, their degradation. “This is the Land of the Unfenced, where crouch on either hand scores of ugly one-room cabins, cheerless and dirty. Here lies the Negro problem in its naked dirt and penury.”70 Where Washington’s 1899 publication presented the South as a land of opportunity, Du Bois, in 1903, focused on its bleakness. “It is a depressing place,—bare, unshaded, with no charm of past association, only a memory of forced human toil,—now, then, and before the war.”71

But Du Bois, too, held that there was hope in the South. He wrote, “[h]ow curious a land is this,—how full of untold story, of tragedy and laughter, and the rich legacy of human life; shadowed with a tragic past, and big with future promise. This is the Black Belt of Georgia.” In his tour through the region, Du Bois also discovered “a comfortable feeling that the Negro is

68 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 120. As he would elsewhere in his career, Du Bois made it clear that white racism and power had shaped the conditions of the “Negro problem.” See Barbara J. Fields, “‘Origins of the New South’ and the Negro Question,” *Journal of Southern History* 67.4 (November 2001), pp. 811-26, esp. p. 817-18.
69 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 125. Du Bois reiterated the ecological arguments of Frederick Douglass, Hinton Rowan Helper, and others here and perhaps recognized that land use and soil fertility had motivated some freedpeople to leave the region. At the very least, Du Bois suggested a connection between land use and the state of society, linking the worn out soil of Georgia to the dismal state of black life in the region.
70 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 120.
Thus Du Bois’s black belt was a land of contrasts—of oppression and advancement, of isolated, forlorn figures and of vigorous, hardworking people. It was at once a place to leave and a place to make a home.

Du Bois was not a southerner himself, and his relationship with the region was more troubled than was Washington’s. As a student at Fisk, and later as a scholar-in-residence in Atlanta, Georgia, Du Bois had sojourned in the South, observed its problems, and played the part of the educated outsider who brought knowledge to isolated black communities. For Du Bois, hope for black people lay in the South, but only if isolation could be overcome by forging migratory and information networks that linked those communities to the outside world. Migration and education, by linking the South to the North, and thus linking southern black life into the national life, offered a way to make the black South dynamic and progressive.

This is the vision Du Bois presented in The Quest of the Silver Fleece (hereafter QSF). The novel tells the story of Bles Alwyn and Zora Cresswell and their struggle for self-realization and racial uplift in the Alabama black belt. It is a lengthy novel with intertwined plot lines foreshadowing many of Du Bois’s scholarly arguments, such as the combination of northern and southern capital in the overthrow of Reconstruction. A full summary is neither practical nor necessary; what follows is a gloss of the relevant plot details.

Bles has come to Alabama from Georgia to pursue education at a small school led by a northern white woman on land owned by the Cresswells, who are former slaveowners and the representatives of the white elite in the story. Zora is the mixed-race descendant of the

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73 Aiello indicates that Du Bois’s nonsouthern roots help explain some of Washington’s chafing at Du Bois’s criticism—Washington did not want an “outsider…incapable of an authentic understanding of the black southern experience” telling him the best approach to problems in the South. See Aiello, The Battle for the Souls of Black Folk, p. xix.
74 Du Bois explored this argument at length in Black Reconstruction in America.
Cresswells’ patriarch (St. John Cresswell) but is described as a “child of the swamp,” referring to a waste land on the Cresswells’ plantation where Zora lives with her mother (who is portrayed as a practitioner of voodoo); Zora cannot afford schooling and has decided she hates the teachers and the school.\textsuperscript{75} The swamp is Zora’s refuge, and it becomes a central space in the narrative—Zora has gotten her education from the swamp and forest, a characterization in keeping with Dunbar’s and Washington’s emphasis on “nature.”

Zora and Bles meet in the first pages of the novel and agree to be friends for life. They devise a scheme to raise some cotton deep in the swamp area. The ground is fertile, owing to the rich humus of the swampland, and shielded from white surveillance by the thick trees. The growth of the secret cotton crop matches the maturation of Bles and Zora. Not only do the two fall in love as the bolls form, but they also experience the first of their racial awakenings. Bles perceives “in the dark thousands of his kind about him, a mighty calling to deeds. He was becoming conscious of the narrowness and straightness of his black world, and red anger flashed in him ever and again as he felt his bonds.”\textsuperscript{76} Bles and Zora admit their love on an island in the swamp, surrounded by their crop, but the younger of the two northern white women teachers, who thinks Zora is unsuitable for Bles, suggests to Bles that Zora is impure. And indeed, when Bles confronts Zora, she admits that she was raped by her “master” (likely St. John Cresswell’s son Harry, who is Zora’s half-brother) when a young child. Bles, full of pity and confusion, breaks off the engagement. Zora harvests the secret crop alone and brings it to the Cresswells to sell. The harvest amounts to two bales of high quality cotton, but Zora finds herself handed a bill for a twenty-five dollar debt after the elder Cresswell reckons the account.

\textsuperscript{75} W. E. B. Du Bois, \textit{The Quest of the Silver Fleece: A Novel} (Chicago, 1911), p. 44.
\textsuperscript{76} Du Bois, \textit{The Quest of the Silver Fleece}, p. 126.
Bles and Zora both leave the South not long after their broken engagement, the Cresswells’ theft of the cotton, and the death of Zora’s mother. Zora accompanies an elite, northern-born white woman, Mrs. Vanderpool, to New York and then to Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, Bles has made his way to Washington, D.C., where he pursues politics and society. They both find their sojourn in the North produces a commitment to their people in the South. Zora’s decision to return South takes the form of a religious conversion. She happens on a church where the black preacher is calling on the congregation to “‘Go down to Pharaoh and smite him in God’s name. Go down to the South where we writhe. Strive—work—build—hew—lead—inspire!’” Zora approaches the altar and declares, “‘Here I am—send me.’” She later tells Mrs. Vanderpool, “I’m going back South to work for my people.”

Bles, however, returns south because he fails in the North. Unaccustomed to big city politics, Bles finds himself maneuvered into making a career-ending speech against the Republican Party to defend an education bill. Bles had already committed his life’s work to fixing the southern problem, which he thought he would do in the nation’s capital. But Bles found Washington too removed, and too duplicitous, to actually help his southern people. Realizing he is out of his depth in Washington, and chafing from the manipulation of national politics, Bles feels out of place. He hears that Zora has returned to the South, to “the Burden,” and in less than a month Bles, too, takes the train south.

Zora has been busy after her return. With ten thousand dollars of Mrs. Vanderpool’s money, Zora secures a contract with Cresswell to buy the swampland on installments. She has

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developed a plan to transform her region of the black belt, and her people, through landownership, cooperative farming, and collective action. Zora plans to enlist local black farmers to clear the swampland, sell the timber, and plant cotton. The proceeds will then secure the financial foundations of the black school and get the black tenant farmers out of debt to the Cresswells. Zora’s vision amounts to “a bold regeneration of the land.”\footnote{Du Bois, \textit{The Quest of the Silver Fleece}, p. 400.} Bles signs on as Zora’s lieutenant, and the two set about their work of organizing the local black population into a united and assertive community; their plan reflects many elements of Washington’s philosophy in its emphasis on agriculture as the basis for uplift and development. As Bles explains to black locals,

> ‘We shall sell a few twenty-acre farms but keep one central plantation of one hundred acres for the school. Here Miss Zora will carry on her work and the school will run a model farm with your help. We want to centre here agencies to make life better. We want all sorts of industries; we want a little hospital with a resident physician and two or three nurses; we want a cooperative store for buying supplies; we want a cotton-gin and saw-mill; and in the future other things. This land here, as I have said, is the richest around.’\footnote{Du Bois, \textit{The Quest of the Silver Fleece}, pp. 403-04.}

Indeed, \textit{QS\!F} presents a vision of black modernity as emerging from rurality—quite literally the swamp becomes the foundation for an assertive black southern presence.

All, of course, does not go according to plan. When Cresswell gets a sense of the rising power of an organized black community, he enlists the aid of the local “poor whites,” represented by an upstart sheriff. Cresswell’s hints and suggestions lead the sheriff to organize a posse to raid and burn the school, but an informant alerts Bles and Zora. They organize a defense of the school, during which a single black man is shot while the posse, having split up, fires on itself. More white posse members die by friendly fire than do black defenders of the school by enemy fire, but the mob returns and arrests two black men found in possession of firearms. The two are quickly lynched. Cresswell, who is old and dying, realizes the wickedness he has
unleashed through the mob, and his dying act is to leave a large sum of his estate to Zora and the school. United in the struggle and needing each other’s strength, Zora and Bles decide to marry. Thus the book ends with the passing of the symbol of the slaveocracy—St. John Cresswell—and the rising hope for a southern black community anchored in Zora and Bles’s educated-but-agrarian leadership.

As with Griggs’s *Imperium* and Dunbar’s two stories, Du Bois’s novel both constructs an identity of black southerners and suggests the race problem must be worked out within the South. But importantly, Du Bois departed from Griggs and Dunbar by including migration as a necessary component of Zora and Bles’s leadership. Migrating to the North helps both re-center the South in their lives, and they both realize, while in Washington, D.C., that not only are they out of their element in the North, but they are also needed in the South. Their stay in the North is vital to their education, however. During his time in the North, Bles becomes acquainted with the machinations of national politics and recognizes that they are too removed to help improve local conditions in the black belt. National politics, Bles learns by migrating, will not solve the race problem; instead, he pursues a bottom-up, grassroots approach carried out within the South. Zora, too, find that her time in the North has revealed to her “the Way.”

Leaving the South, in Du Bois’s novel, completes the education of Zora and Bles and transforms both into vigorous and assertive leaders.

Du Bois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, therefore, offers a way to reconcile the platforms of Washington and Du Bois. Through emigration from the South, the novel not only suggests the rightfulness of black belonging in the South, but also dramatizes how a classically educated talented tenth could contribute to a Washingtonian/Tuskegeeian program of economic

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advancement and racial uplift within the South. Unlike in Dunbar’s works, for Du Bois, southern homecoming represented not a second dismal displacement, but rather an opportunity to fight for belonging and place. The South, for Du Bois, was not necessarily the site of progress, but migration could bring modernity to the South. Bles and Zora are presented as “a younger class of educated black folk, who were learning to fight with new weapons.” They represent a new generation of assertive and organized leaders, and they are more in tune with modernity because of their sojourn in the North. Migration offered a way to link the black South into the narrative of turn-of-the-century progress and modernity more generally; migration, in *QSF*, shaped the “new Negro” leadership who would bring progress, organization, and uplift to the black South.

In an interesting side-story of the novel, Du Bois also critiqued the idea that “southerners,” as an identity, included only white people. While in Washington, Mrs. Vanderpool encourages a black woman to enter an “all-Southern” art competition under her unknown maiden name. Her entry, a sculpture called “The Outcasts,” wins first prize. The event’s organizer confronts the black artist, telling her “‘You know we could not give the prize to a—Negro,’” and asks, “‘Why did you send your exhibit when you knew it was not wanted?’”

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83 For Bles and Zora as representatives of the Talented Tenth, see Doku, *Cosmopolitanism in the Fictive Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*, chap. 2.
85 A review of Du Bois’s novel noted that “There’d be no South if there were no negroes.” Moreover, the review continued, Du Bois “not only sees the negro prostrate, damned. He sees him risen, saved. DuBois belongs to that group of thinkers which makes the full human claim for the negro. He don’t say get rich and then you’ll be respected….He rather says: Do as you please.” The reviewer thus contrasted Du Bois and Washington, finding Du Bois the more assertive of the two. *The Conservator* 22 (January 1911), pp. 171-73.
86 This is a common idea repeated in every day language. When non-southerners and liberal pundits criticize “Mississippi voters” or other southern voters for supporting President Trump, they disregard that the black-majority counties of the Delta region cast between 60 and 85 percent of their votes for Hillary Clinton in 2016. “For example, most of us, at one time or another, have heard, or perhaps even said, that ‘southerners are racist’ or ‘southerners owned slaves.’ Such statements implicitly connect being southern with being white,” according to Ashley B. Thompson and Melissa M. Sloan, “Race as Region, Region as Race: How Black and White Southerners Understand Their Regional Identities,” *Southern Cultures* 18.4 (Winter 2012), pp. 72-95.
Caroline Wynn, the artist, defends her work and her southern identity. “‘You asked all Southern-born persons. I am a person and I am Southern born.’”87 The incident is an embarrassment to its white organizer. More important, it offered Du Bois a way to reinforce the idea of black belonging in the South—composing a sizable portion of the South’s population, black people were, Du Bois suggested, fully southern (and fully people).

The literary works of Griggs, Dunbar, and Du Bois thus reflected central portions of Booker T. Washington’s ideology and program, which stressed building up the South and uplifting the region’s African American population from within. Washington suggested repeatedly that economic, and thus social, opportunity lay in the South, and he opposed large-scale emigration and colonization movements. Like Griggs’s Imperium, Washington’s message countenanced the possibility that intra-South migration could bring material and spatial advancement; he did not oppose such movement. Indeed, Washington held up Mifflin W. Gibbs’s Arkansas emigration program as a worthwhile effort and wrote the introduction to the first edition of Gibbs’s autobiography. Washington’s ideas were also reflected in the life story of Scott Bond, a successful black farmer in Arkansas. Bond’s biography, published in 1917, is replete with pictures of Bond and Washington side-by-side. The book used Bond’s story to argue for a Washingtonian plan of economic uplift and agrarian living, and it laid out a vision of black success and belonging in the Jim Crow South. Gibbs’s autobiography and Bond’s biography, published in 1902 and 1917 respectively, also used print culture to lay claim to black people as southerners and the South as home.

Gibbs we have already met—as registrar of the federal land office in Little Rock, Arkansas, Gibbs put into practice a program of supporting black migration to and landownership

87 Du Bois, The Quest of the Silver Fleece, p. 348.
in Arkansas. The state, for Gibbs, symbolized black opportunity in the South. Fertile soil, profitable stands of useful hardwoods, and mineral and natural resources made Arkansas an ideal place to forge black belonging through agriculture and development. Gibbs’s autobiography, published in 1902, provided a public record of his ideology and action. Interspersed throughout the book were ideas of material prosperity as the foundation for African American uplift and advancement. Gibbs’s autobiography presented a portrait of a man working tirelessly to promote black emigration to Arkansas while adhering to a Washingtonian approach of cooperation with the white South, landownership and the accumulation of property, and the development of natural resources and agricultural pursuits to achieve recognition as integral members of the body politic.  

Scott Bond represented all that Gibbs and Washington counseled, and his biography, published in 1917, laid out a vision of how success, and belonging, could come from developing the southern countryside; Bond built an agricultural empire in the fertile soils of Arkansas, and his biography used his success to advertise the opportunity that existed within the South. Historian Stephen L. Recken has described Scott Bond as a “rural counterpart to Gibbs’s urban success story.” And indeed, Bond’s biography, written by his son Theo Bond and their business partner, Dan Rudd, presented Bond as a model to be emulated by those seeking success, and

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88 Gibbs promoted intra-South migration among African Americans, and he devoted his career, after 1871, to working to uplift black southerners. Gibbs, however, was not opposed to black emigration from the South. He supported Senator Windom’s exodus efforts, touring Kansas with James T. Rapier for Windom and the National Emigration Aid Society. Like Washington, Gibbs did oppose emigration from the United States, arguing that “There is no better place for the negro than the United States, if he will get down to business.” Gibbs’s ideology of the development of natural resources leading to material prosperity leading to political recognition centered on Arkansas, as discussed in chapter 2. His ideology, which had much in common with Washington’s, was reflected in the life of Scott Bond.

belonging, in the South. Representing the culmination of Washingtonian ideals, Bond became a model of black progress in the South. J. C. Napier, who wrote the preface to Bond’s biography, called him “progressive” and praised his “unique and purely Southern method of expression.” Bond, Napier suggested, was a modern southerner.

The biography overall reads as a handbook for exploiting the natural resources of Arkansas. Bond acquires and then clears stands of valuable timber, develops and markets gravel beds, learns to make bricks from his property’s clay, and practices careful and innovative agriculture. He is prudent in his dealings and disciplined in his household economy. A well-respected member of the Negro Business League, Bond appears in the biography as the paragon of the ideology of Gibbs and Washington. But while Bond the man was, in fact, all of these things, the Bond in print was a conscious creation—a symbol of belonging for the wider culture.

The authors, Theo Bond and Dan Rudd, evoked Bond’s story to inspire others. “If each Negro will do one one-hundredth part as much as the one about whom we write, the Negro’s place in the sun will be larger,” they wrote. That place, they thought, was firmly in the South. Thus embedded within the narrative of Bond’s life were lessons and exhortations to black readers to identify with and to seek opportunity and advancement in the South. A long quotation of Scott Bond discussing a timbering operation, for instance, is used as “a reminder that the resources of Arkansas are hardly scratched.” After recounting those resources, the authors posit that the South “is the best place for [the Negro].” A trip to Kansas City allows Bond to observe

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90 Theo Bond and Dan Rudd are credited as the authors, but the book comprises a series of extended quotes from Scott Bond. So, while ostensibly a biography, From Slavery to Wealth is more akin to an oral history of Scott Bond. Dan A. Rudd and Theo. Bond, From Slavery to Wealth: The Life of Scott Bond. The Rewards of Honesty, Industry, Economy, and Perseverance (Madison, Ark., 1917).
91 Washington gave a speech to a 7,000-person audience at Scott Bond’s house in Arkansas in 1911. Washington noted that Bond was “in many ways a great man.” BTW Papers, vol. 11, p. 297.
92 Rudd and Bond, From Slavery to Wealth, p. 382.
93 Rudd and Bond, From Slavery to Wealth, p. 133.
that “the colored man’s financial opportunity was far greater in the South” than in the North.\textsuperscript{94}

While in Kansas City, Scott Bond meets a black man from Mississippi who moved there after the Civil War. The man’s migration is termed a “‘wild goose chase,’” and his story concludes with the man admitting that “‘the south is the only place for the Negro.’”\textsuperscript{95}

After leaving Kansas City, Bond travels to Leavenworth, Kansas, where he tours an army barracks and speaks to the colored troops stationed there. Most are from the South, and Bond implores them to return to their homes when their service ends. His speech, as related by Rudd and Bond, shares much with Washington’s 1880 speech to the black graduates of Lincoln University:

when you have finished your term of enlistment with the government I beg and plead with you to return to the south, which is in one sense of the word, our fatherland, which is the greatest and only place that nature has prepared for us to dwell. We, the Negroes of the south despite our mishaps are letting down our buckets where we are.

We live in a part of the country where we can master one of the greatest commodities of the American continent, the fleecy cotton that is grown by southern Negroes.

It seems to me that providence has prepared the south for us. We are the only nationality on the globe that can master the situation properly. The cotton plant can stand more brutal treatment than any other plant on earth. For this cause and many others I believe the south to be the natural home of our race.\textsuperscript{96}

Black southern belonging, for Scott Bond, was sanctioned by God and made worthy by agricultural knowledge and labor. Put another way, Scott Bond’s biography argued that black people had earned their right to the South.

Other examples further illustrate the point. Relating the story of a man who caught the “‘African Fever’” and decided to emigrate provides an opportunity for the authors, via Scott Bond, to reject foreign emigration. The emigrant, Taylor Swift, loses all his money in Africa and comes back to Arkansas after six months, where by working hard and drawing on his old friends and neighbors (including Scott Bond), he is able to amass the wealth that eluded him in Africa.

\textsuperscript{94} Rudd and Bond, \textit{From Slavery to Wealth}, p. 243.
\textsuperscript{95} Rudd and Bond, \textit{From Slavery to Wealth}, p. 244.
\textsuperscript{96} Rudd and Bond, \textit{From Slavery to Wealth}, p. 248.
Swift’s emigration story, according to Rudd and Bond, “shows what a Negro can do in this country.”97 Two black emigrants in the book thus either regret or fail at their emigrations; the Kansas City man thinks he would have done better staying in Mississippi, and the African migrant returns to Arkansas.

Moreover, in emphasizing not only that black people did belong in the South but also that the South needed its black population, a story about Scott Bond’s attempt to use a gasoline engine to run a concrete mixer provides the authors an opportunity to relate how black labor had been essential to southern development. Black southerners, according to Bond, have been necessary “to make the sunny south what she is; to clear her forests, build her railroads and cities and to make her fertile fields blossom as the rose.”98 Much like the works of fiction discussed above, Bond’s narrative is a didactic exploration of black southern belonging.

The authors included a series of short essays toward the end of the biography, switching from narration of Scott Bond’s life to discussing the current state of society and race relations in 1917. They addressed the “present exodus of Southern Negroes,” which they blamed on “the repressive spirit” of the Jim Crow order and its white southern supporters.99 They understood the reasons to leave the South but lamented the necessity of migration, and instead called on African Americans to commit themselves to reform, advocacy, and economic development within the South, as had Booker T. Washington. “Oh, Southland, the land of Dixie, the land of the moss, the cypress and the pine, the land of flowers and of sunshine, the land of the mocking bird, the land of corn and cotton, the Negro loves thee,” wrote Rudd and Bond. Calling on readers to emulate

97 Rudd and Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth*, p. 211. They further emphasized the point: “The south seems to be the only place on earth for the Negro, with its fertile soil, its mild climate, its sunshine and its flowers, it does seem that nature had left this fair land in which to raise the Negro to the highest state of civilization.” Rudd and Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth*, p. 42.
98 Rudd and Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth*, p. 235.
99 Rudd and Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth*, p. 379.
Scott Bond’s model of hard work, frugality, and progress, they indicated their own commitment to southern belonging. “We will ‘let down our buckets where we are,’” they declared. As thousands of black southerners surged toward the North in a movement that would significantly reshape twentieth-century political and demographic history, Rudd and Bond staked a claim to the South. “Whatever may be the apparent difficulties, the south[,] especially Arkansas, is the best place in the world for the poor man; and as the Negro is the poorest man in the world, it is the best place for him.”¹⁰⁰ In the South was to be found the locus of black opportunity and belonging. Published two years after Booker T. Washington’s death, Bond’s biography successfully employed Washington’s message of southern belonging to reject the emerging trend of mass migration to the North.

The biography’s publication in 1917, however, pitted Bond’s (and by extension, Washington’s) message of southern belonging against the emerging anti-South rhetoric of the Chicago Defender. Indeed, the death of Booker T. Washington in 1915 inaugurated an editorial shift in the Defender. Before Washington’s death, the paper reflected a sentiment similar to that of The Quest of the Silver Fleece, blending Washington’s emphasis on building up the South with Du Bois’s more militant, more direct approach to confronting southern racism. Similar to Scott Bond’s work within the South during the same period, the Defender in July 1915, for instance, published an article calling on black southern farmers to diversify their crops to aid the allies’ war effort in Europe.¹⁰¹ That same war effort, however, opened industrial occupations in

¹⁰⁰ Rudd and Bond, From Slavery to Wealth, p. 382.  
¹⁰¹ Scott Bond made similar appeals to black farmers in the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta, telling them “the opportunity offered to encourage diversification and showed that the program outlined by preceding speakers was not only good for war times, but would work equally well in times of peace; and showed that it was by this method that he had built up his own enterprises. He then, as he always does when talking in public, had a little heart to heart talk with his own people. He told them among other things that greater than the conservation of food and feed is the conservation of character, and greater than all these is the protection of the home.” Rudd and Bond, From Slavery to Wealth, p. 371.
the North, which, coupled with the racist violence and disenfranchisement in the South, encouraged significant numbers of black southerners to emigrate. The Defender, by fall 1916, was supporting the movement, and hailed it as a “Second Emancipation.” An editorial months later urged that “Every black man for the sake of his wife and daughters especially should leave even at financial sacrifice every spot in the south where his worth is not appreciated....We know full well that would mean a depopulation of that section and if it were possible we would glory in its accomplishment.”

More than it had been a decade before, the idea of African American belonging in the South became a contested notion in black print culture. Responding to southern white newspapers that told black emigrants they would freeze to death in the temperate climate of the North, the Defender suggested the cold air of southern racism was far more bracing. “IF YOU CAN FREEZE TO DEATH in the north and be free, why FREEZE to death in the south and be a slave, where your mother, sister and daughter are raped and burned at the stake, where your father, brother and son are treated with contempt and hung to a pole [and] riddled with bullets”? For many African Americans in the South, the answer was plain, and migration became a widespread method of both collective action and individual agency after 1917.

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102 Chicago Defender, October 7, 1916, p. 12. The Defender even criticized the white South for its former desire to fix the race problem by removing the region’s black population; now that they were getting a taste of what they asked for, the Defender suggested, white southerners’ “turmoil” over the exodus was “ridiculous.” Chicago Defender, October 7, 1916, p. 3. See also Michaeli, The Defender, chap. 4 and Mark K. Dolan, “Extra! Chicago Defender Race Records Ads Show South from Afar,” Southern Cultures 13.3 (Fall 2007), pp. 106-24.

103 Chicago Defender February 24, 1917, p. 1.

The death of Booker T. Washington silenced one of the most vocal proponents of black southern belonging. Others works, such as Scott Bond’s biography or Sutton Griggs’s 1920s pamphlets, continued to contest the notion that emigration from the region was really a solution. But they fought an uphill battle as the Great Migration took on ever larger dimensions. Wartime labor needs and the postwar economic boom attracted many black southerners to northern urban centers, and the trend toward agricultural mechanization during and after the New Deal continued the movement.

The Great Migration has been viewed as an assertive and powerful movement for economic advancement and political recognition. Though it undoubtedly was those things, it was also, in many ways, the painful culmination of decades of intra-South migration and the related debates about demographic and social belonging. Striking out for the North, according to some, was admitting defeat in the South. Migration was displacement, even when it was voluntary. Yet despite the dimensions of the migration, many black southerners remained in the South. Many likely lacked the means to migrate. Others were bound to the section by kinship and community ties. Others still chose the South as their home, deciding, as had Washington, Griggs, Gibbs, Bond, and others, that the South, imperfect though it was, was worth fighting for.
CONCLUSION

Sometime around 1913, John B. Rayner penciled a missive to an editor. He titled his letter “The Negro’s Opportunity in the South,” and in it, he was clear-eyed about the problems facing African Americans in the Jim Crow South. “I was born and brought up in the South,” he wrote, “and I know the South.” He blasted James K. Vardaman, who had just been elected U.S. Senator from Mississippi, for campaigning on a mission to repeal the Reconstruction Amendments. Rayner also lamented the “unfulfilled utopian promises of the Republican Party, the intolerance of the Democratic Party; ignorant and immoral political leaders among my own race, ignorant school teachers; ignorant and lecherous preachers; and parasitic leaders in the Negro Secret Societies.” Rayner’s South was full of problems. And yet, he concluded his epistle with a hope for the South and a plea for belonging. “After all things Considered,” he wrote, “the South is the best place for the Negro, for it is the only place where the good Negro can grow, and accumulate, and rest in peace, and security.”

John B. Rayner was the mixed-race son of Kenneth Rayner, who had led the short-lived effort to create the white ethno-state of Jackson in 1873. John Rayner would not likely have supported his father’s aborted state movement; though he was well positioned to reflect on place and movement, he was an advocate for black southern belonging. Before becoming a prominent politician in Texas, John Rayner had led a group of migrants from North Carolina to Texas in 1881. Perhaps he did so in response to the efforts of pro-immigrationists in Texas, who organized the Texas Farmers’ Association in 1880 with the aim of founding black agricultural

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1 John B. Rayner, “The Negro’s Opportunity in the South,” John B. Rayner Papers, Box 3F218, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. Rayner likely intended to send this letter to the editor of the Houston Chronicle, to whom he submitted a number of letters on this same theme in 1912 and 1913. I have not found this same letter in print, so perhaps Rayner never submitted it for publication.
colonies in the state. Meeting in convention in Dallas, the association decided to reach out to
black people elsewhere in the South, with the hope of inducing migration from the older, longer
settled regions to the broad domain of Texas lands. Mirroring the ideas of Arkansas’s pro-
immigration leaders, active around the same time, the Texas delegates resolved to “publish an
address inviting the colored people from all the sections of the south to come and take hold.” The
resolution was “[a]dopted amid cheers and cries of, ‘Good!’ ‘That’s it!’ ‘Onward!’”\(^2\)

Evidently, the black Texans who composed the Farmers’ Association believed their state
offered a better destination for potential Exodusters than did the midwestern states. One delegate
at the convention “represented one hundred and fifty exodusters from Caddo, Louisiana, about to
leave for Kansas, who desired to come to Texas and locate on the proposed colony, if the
benefits of the association were extended to Louisianians as well as Texans.”\(^3\) In response the
convention agreed to aid the Caddoans by providing them with temporary labor until suitable
lands could be found for long-term settlement. Like Senator William Windom, they, too, thought
the black population should be redistributed within the United States, but on an east-west axis
rather than a north-south one. Their 1880 appeal joined a small movement, represented in the
pages of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, to advertise the attractiveness of Texas amid a
growing out-of-the-South movement. The *Advocate* had noted in June 1879, when Kansas Fever
was the rage, that black southerners “had better emigrate to Texas, as it has the best climate.”\(^4\)

It is unclear whether Rayner was aware of the *Advocate’s* position, the Texas convention,
or even the Texas Farmers’ Association more broadly, but somehow, in the midst of the Exodus,
while many black North Carolinians headed to Indiana and Kansas, Rayner, preferring to stay within the South, led his group to Texas. The geopolitical information networks of an increasingly assertive black population had carried the idea of Texas to North Carolina, where Rayner, a man whose political aspirations and leadership skills were ascendant, was ready to move. His intra-South migration was every bit as political as the Exodus to the Midwest or the later Great Migration to the urban North. Staying in the South, for Rayner as for thousands of others, was not passive acquiescence to the violence and racism of “redemption” and Jim Crow; it was, instead, a conscious decision to remain in the South despite these challenges and to try to make the region a better home for himself and others of African American descent.

Rayner remained politically active in his new community of Calvert, Texas. Outspoken, a noted orator, and a skilled organizer, Rayner became a leader among Texas Populists in the 1890s, pushing the movement toward biracial and cross-party fusion. Rayner had a firm grasp on the dynamics of race and class in the South, suggesting time and again that poor southerners, white and black, shared more in common than the issues that separated them. During the 1894 Populist convention in Waco, Texas, Rayner declared that “the white man of the south is the negro’s first, best and firmest friend.” Rayner brought black Texans into the Populist fold and pushed the state party to adopt planks addressing the convict lease system, election fraud and voter intimidation, lien laws for sharecroppers and renters, and public education. Rayner toured the state speaking for the Populist cause and organized the black vote at the grassroots.

The Populist movement failed in the late 1890s, and Rayner retreated from the public for a while. By the middle of the first decade of the 1900s, however, he had devoted his attention to industrial education. In 1904 he became financial agent for the Conroe-Porter Industrial College in

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5 Rayner, quoted in Cantrell, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent*, p. 213.
Conroe, Texas. Rayner adopted a Washingtonian message of self-help and vocational training, and he continued advocating cooperation with white southerners. Rayner hoped Conroe-Porter could “be made to Texas what Tuskegee is to Alabama.” Like Booker T. Washington, Rayner campaigned for industrial education and agricultural improvement as ways to build up the black South from within. While the United States contemplated entry into World War I, Rayner again wrote to an editor, this time to argue that “the Southern Colored man” was “the Federal Government’s best asset.” Drawing a comparison to European socialism and Asian “fanaticism,” Rayner called on white Americans to view black Americans as allies in a changing world. “I beg you to publish this,” he told the editor, “because the world needs to know that the Southern Negro is a true American in sentiment, a self-denying [sic] hero in the time of war and a true servant in the time of peace.”

Black people, declared Rayner, were fully southern and fully American.

Rayner argued for black southern belonging while he suggested that a wartime United States would need black labor. If he noticed the tension between regional belonging and labor-related migration embedded in his suggestion, he did not call attention to it. Rayner died before World War I ended, so he never saw the Great Migration grow into its later demographic and cultural dimensions. Against the surge of that growth, Rayner’s message of southern belonging fought a hard battle. Between 1900 and 1960, around five million black southerners struck out for the urban North, creating sizable black populations in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and other northern hubs of industry and commerce. Their reasons were many: some fled violence and oppression, while others sought jobs in factories during the world

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wars and as southern cotton agriculture mechanized in the 1940s. For whatever reasons they left, African American migrants transformed the United States, carrying the search for belonging into the North, where it created cultural and artistic movements and fueled the civil rights movement.

Though the Great Migration was a tremendous and sustained population movement within the United States, it did not happen quickly enough to suit Senator Richard B. Russell. In March 1964, faced with the prospect of the Civil Rights Bill, Russell, an obstructionist, “proposed…a voluntary ‘racial relocation’ program to adjust the imbalance of the Negro population between the 11 states of the old Confederacy and the rest of the Union.” Intending to submit it as an amendment to the Civil Rights Bill, Russell explained that his “thoroughly democratic” bill would achieve an equitable distribution of the black population “as near the national average as possible.” Carrying out the task would be a new federal agency, the Voluntary Racial Relocation Commission, which would offer inducements to black southerners to leave their homes and resettle in “states having less than a 10.5 per cent proportion of Negroes.” The commission would work with state and federal agencies to retrain the “relocatees” for new types of labor in their new homes.\(^\text{10}\)

Despite its “humanitarian” promises of travel and housing grants and employment training, Russell’s proposal sought the same ends as had senators Matthew Butler and Zebulon Vance in 1890. Russell thought it was not “‘fair or right’ for sections of the country having the smallest percentage of Negroes ‘to undertake to dictate the social relationships’ of the sections having the preponderant percentage of the Negroes.” Russell thought distribution offered a way to get northern liberals to stop telling white southerners what to do. “This would afford those who support these so-called civil rights proposals an opportunity to put into practice in their own

\(^{10}\text{All quotes in this paragraph from “Relocate Negroes Evenly in States, Russell Proposes,” New York Times, March 17, 1964, p. 1.}\)
areas the social order that they find so desirable and which they are attempting to force upon the people of the South.”

Eighty-five years after the Kansas Exodus, Windom’s ideas of population distribution had again found voice in the U.S. Senate.

Like every other attempt to legislate a program of population distribution, Russell’s bill faced considerable opposition, even among his own party, and it failed to become law. But the Great Migration continued, carrying with it more than two and a half million black southerners between 1970 and 2000. All told, in the twentieth century, almost eight million African Americans left the South to search for spatial and social belonging in the North. Their migration from the South confirmed the national scope of Jim Crow segregation, which the previously smaller numbers of African Americans in the urban North had obscured, and generally aided in the “southernization” of America, according to historian James Gregory. Northern cities redlined their residential sections, as did southern cities, in the twentieth century, demarcating and conscribing limited areas of black belonging. By the mid-1970s, the trend in migration had reversed, as African Americans began to make their way back toward the South; since 1975, more than 600,000 have returned to the South. Recent evidence suggests the trend is increasing.

As was the case for the freedpeople and their children who moved around within the South between 1865 and 1915, return migrants, too, are searching for belonging. Like Ann Dixon, who migrated from North Carolina to Arkansas in the 1880s, they are “hunting a better place and more freedom.” For a considerable number of African Americans, the South has

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12 Gregory argues that white and black emigrants from the South “southernized the aspects of the regions they settled, introducing tastes, practices, and institutions—including food, music, religion, accents, and political styles—that moderated the differences between the South and other parts of the United States.” Gregory, The Southern Diaspora, pp. 327.
always represented the best hope for finding that place. Though much progress has been made, the search for place, for equal acceptance, and for belonging continues.
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