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Coming Home: Black Return Migration to the Yazoo -Mississippi Delta.

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**COMING HOME: BLACK RETURN MIGRATION TO THE YAZOO-MISSISSIPPI
DELTA**

A Dissertation

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by

**Robert Norman Brown, II
A.B., University of Georgia, 1987
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May 2001**

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I dedicate this work to my wife Kathryn Vaughn Brown.

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ABSTRACT

Between 1910 and 1970, African Americans moved out of South in one of the largest movements in human history. Today, many of these migrants, and their descendents, are coming home. Some estimates hold that more than nine million black Southerners left the South for new lives in the North and West. The migration reached its peak in the 1950s, and began to slow in the 1960s. In the early 1970s, African Americans began returning to the American South. With major shifts in the United States economy, a change that began in the early 1970s, jobs began to leave the traditional industrial centers in the North and West; African Americans were not far behind. This study looks at one region to which many Africans have fled, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.

Regions like the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta have been largely ignored in black return migration studies. Much of the work that has been done to document the return migration of blacks to the South has focused on the South's urban areas. Scholars have argued that the economic dynamism of the South has provided an important pull factor for prospective black return migrants. What has been neglected is the fact that there is also a significant return of African Americans to the rural South, a region of chronic economic stagnation. The Delta, as natives call it, is a just such a region.

While the Census Bureau collects information on its long forms that can lead the researcher to a better understanding of African American migration processes and place attachments, the data is imperfect and can only provide the backbone of understanding. In an attempt to dig beneath the available data, I employ ethnographic methodology in this study. The American South is a region that has helped shape the identity of African Americans, and the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is an important part of that whole.

Ultimately, the dissertation focuses on why blacks are moving back into the Mississippi Delta, and how they view their home in the Delta as a place to reclaim.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

...to bind for life them who made the cotton to the land their sweat fell on: and he "Yes. Binding them for a while yet, a little while yet. Through and beyond that life and maybe through and beyond the life of that life's sons and maybe even through and beyond that of the sons of those sons.

William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*

Well I'm goin' away to leave,
won't be back no more.
Goin' back down South child,
don't you want to go.

Muddy Waters, *I Can't Be Satisfied*

William Faulkner makes the observation in *Go Down Moses* that African Americans have a special relationship to the South. It is a relationship that has not been broken in the eighty years since blacks began leaving the region in search of better opportunities and greater freedoms in the Promised Land of the North. As a writer and critic of the South, Faulkner held no illusions that the South was a place where blacks enjoyed racial and legal parity with whites. His fiction and essays often revolve around the ways and processes by which blacks suffer in the South. Even when taking into account the fact that the South is a place that had long been hostile to blacks and their dreams of equity and human rights, Faulkner noted that they were bound to the region in ways that would remain evident through many generations. This dissertation looks at the connections of place and time that continue to link the black sons and daughters of the South to their ancestral homeland. To explore this spatial and temporal relationship I focus on African Americans who have moved home to the South in the years since 1970. The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta serves as my case study.

Faulkner wrote these words before the South's mechanization of cotton harvesting. It was this economic process that led to the greatest numbers of black out-migration from the rural South. Exact figures on the Great Black Migration are impossible to enumerate. Census figures are taken too infrequently and the response rates have never been good for the African American population. In addition, there is much ethnographic data that suggests that many migrants stayed away from their Southern homes for only short periods of time, or that they made repeated moves to and from the region. Taking into account these factors, it seems likely that between 5 and 9 million blacks took part in the migration. The number of black Southerners that left the South between 1910 and 1970 is so great that it stands as one of the major migrations in human history (Lemann 1991).

In 1948, five years after catching the Illinois Central out of Mississippi, Muddy Waters stood before a microphone at Chess Record Studios in Chicago (Palmer 1982). The first verse of *I Can't Be Satisfied* expresses dissatisfaction with his new life in the city. Although Waters had achieved many of the dreams that pulled him from the Mississippi Delta, he sang about a longing to return. *I Can't Be Satisfied* became his first hit record. Perhaps it did so because many black migrants in Chicago identified with Waters's sentiment. A deep connection with his Southern homeplace remained central in Muddy Waters's music and in the culture of millions of African Americans who migrated to the North and who held open the possibility of returning south.

Muddy Waters's flight to the North became the dominant pattern in the African American migration story for nearly seventy years while Faulkner's prediction is seen in migration patterns today. For the past twenty years, however, blacks have returned to

the South in successive waves of return migration (Johnson 1990), both to rural and urban areas. This return migration has given pause to our traditional notions of the African American experience in the United States because it challenges geographic assumptions about African Americans and their search for opportunity and equality in the years since the Civil War (Stack 1996).

Po Monkey's Lounge sits on a small rise—high by Delta standards—along a dirt road west of Merigold, Mississippi (Figure 1). It once was a sharecropper's shack and now leans in several directions at once. Through a series of additions it has become a classic Delta juke house adorned with hand-painted signs advertising its services. On Thursday nights it functions as one of the Delta's last operating juke houses. Willie "Po Monkey" Seabry works full time as a farm laborer for a local planter, but has a thriving business one night a week. "Monkey" likes to point out that his clientele does not include "young kids with their hats on backwards and their pants falling down." With great emphasis he adds, "And we don't play none of that rap. This here is a blues club." It might be called, more accurately, a soul club in that one might never hear Howling Wolf, but one can count on hearing Denise LaSalle or Latimore. Recently, Seabry installed televisions in the upper corners of the club, and keeps an endless loop of pornographic videos showing while the patrons drink, and dance. He used to have strippers come in from Memphis on Monday nights, but when word got back to the sheriff's office, "his girls" stopped performing. The Thursday night crowd at Po Monkey's mainly comes from the black middle age and black middle class of the Delta.

The night I went to Po Monkey's I was unprepared to come face to face with a geographic realization that would reconfirm the significance of my dissertation topic.

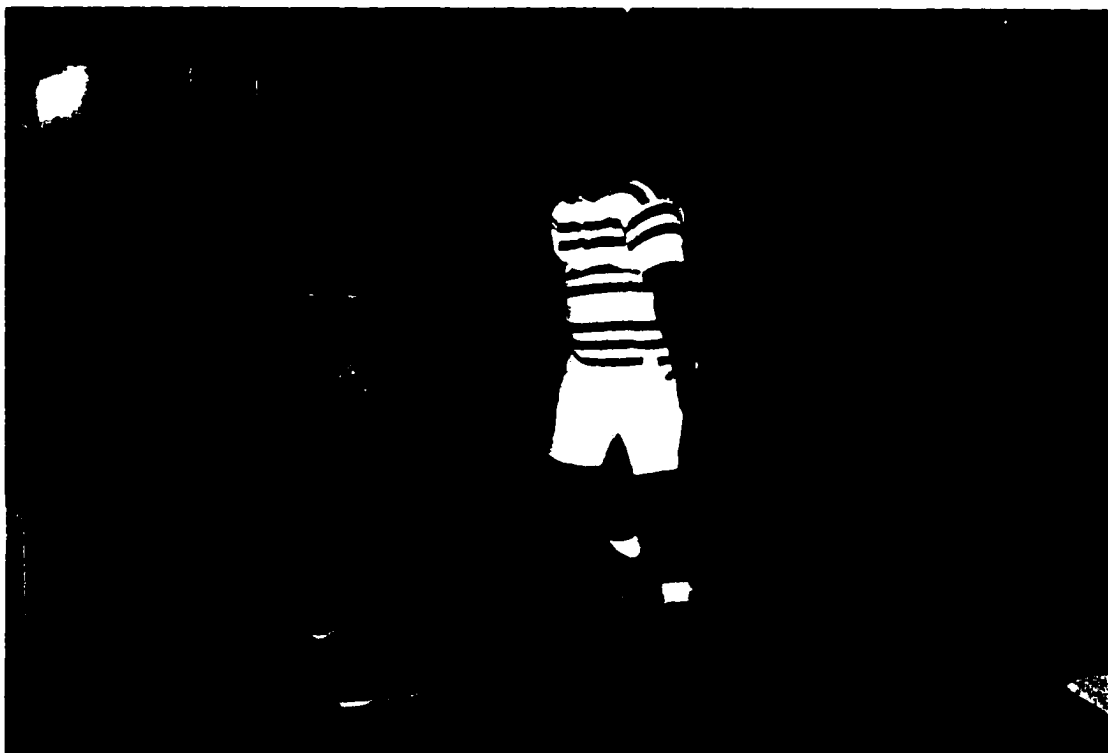


Figure 1. Dance floor at Po' Monkey's Lounge

As is the case every Thursday night, a disk jockey was playing rhythm and blues and keeping up banter between—and even in the middle of—songs. About an hour into his show he began asking the crowd where they were from. “Is there anybody from Mound Bayou?” he bellowed, and a few people responded and waved their hands in the air. “Is anyone from Cleveland; from Clarksdale?” He continued. Finally he shouted, “Is there anybody from Chicago; from Milwaukee?” At this, the room erupted in the cries of several revelers who were visiting from these cities. I asked a woman sitting next to me if she lived in Mississippi now, to which she replied that she did not. I went on to ask her if she would ever consider moving back to the Delta, and she replied with great emphasis that no, she would never move back. Although I do not know whether or not there were any return migrants in the room, the disk jockey brought home to me the reality that African Americans with ties to the Delta are never far away, and that they continue to be a part of the Delta’s black community.

Po Monkey’s Lounge is a juke house in the traditional sense. It sits alone in the middle of fields of cotton and soybean and also serves as the permanent home of its proprietor, Mr. Seabry. Geographically and aesthetically it is a quintessential Delta setting, and yet it still draws patrons whose lives could scarcely be further removed from such a traditional and rural setting. What draws these urban residents out to the country to drink and dance to the sounds of Southern black music? The answer is that they may have forsaken the Delta as a place to live, but they are still participants and actors in its culture. This is the cultural and geographic connection that is at the center of this dissertation.

For sixty years blacks left the South in search of jobs and opportunity. The Great Migration is a phenomenon that has been examined in depth since the first years of its emergence. Scholarly books, articles, and monographs join novels, plays, and poetry in an attempt to document and understand how and why millions of people, many who had rarely traveled out of their county of birth, would abandon a place they and their ancestors knew for another place in a distant and urban land. So great was this attempt to understand the motivations and implications of the northward migration that observers often overlooked that many, if not most, migrants never stopped looking back at the place and people they left behind. For various reasons, many did not find a home in the cities of the North and West and returned to their native South. All migrations spawn counter migrations, but most scholars seem to have been more interested in the larger flow, the Great Black Migration. The latest, and as yet smaller flow (black return migration) has received less attention by scholars.

The idea that there are many migration streams taking place simultaneously within one population group presents a methodological and philosophical choice for the researcher. I am drawn to the stories that people tell about their lives in place and space. In the study of large ethnic migrations, one ought not ignore the fact that there are individuals whose migration direction and motivation are counter to those at the center of study: in this case black return migration to the Delta. In this dissertation I am interested in a migration that is not the dominant migration stream. The data show that there are more African Americans leaving the Delta than coming into the Delta. Nevertheless, this dissertation is about returnees.

Scholars who study migration patterns usually rely on United States census data as their primary source on information. As a body of the federal government assigned the task of taking periodic accountings of the country's population, they do an exhaustive job in enumerating the size and quality of the nation's people. Recent debates in Congress and the press indicate, however, that there are practical and political problems in the process. Response rates tend to be lowest in poor regions of the country's urban and rural areas. The national response rate for the 1990 census was 65 percent, while in Mississippi the rate was 62 percent. The Mississippi Delta had an average response rate of 61 percent (United States Census Bureau 2000). Given that this dissertation focuses on African Americans in the Delta it is almost certain that the published data for blacks in the region is less accurate and complete than one might hope. With these caveats in mind, I rely on census data to provide a statistical backdrop for narratives of actual migrants. My primary aim is to document the stories of black return migrants to the Mississippi Delta in a way that reveals the various themes and meanings for blacks who come back to the region. Census data is an invaluable tool in beginning such a process and may even direct a search for questions into particular matters. It cannot, however, speak for migrants or convey what it means for individuals who participate in the in-migration of blacks to the region.

As the 2000 census was taking shape—significant perhaps because it is an election year—politicians and commentators began to question the proper role of detailed population inquiry as a federal interest. Specifically, politicians on the right of the political spectrum consider many of the questions included on the long questionnaire to be invasive. For example, the long form requests the preparer's race,

state of birth, state of residence five years prior to the census year, marital status, and a host of other qualitative questions. Currently, these questions are the best and only source of information of such detail that provide the social and geographic detail necessary to create a broad understanding of social population trends in the United States. With such threats looming before population researchers, alternative methodologies must be pursued. Ethnographic fieldwork is one possibility; it cannot take the place of census long forms, but can add some of what might be lost.

I have chosen the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta as the case study for my dissertation for a few interrelated reasons. First, the Delta is a poor region—one of the country's poorest—and therefore is distant from much of the return migration that is taking place across the South. Black return migration has received a great deal of attention in the press and academia, but most of this attention has been focused on the dynamic urban Southern places like Atlanta, Birmingham, and Charlotte. Without taking away from the social issues of race and history that African Americans face when they move to such places in the South, they are likely to be motivated by issues of economics and careers. Black migrants to the impoverished Mississippi Delta likely do not arrive with hopes of career advancement and economic gain; they likely arrive with notions of family and place in mind. Second, black return migration to the Mississippi Delta is likely to be bound to an unbroken narrative of familial migration, since the return migrant to the Delta is likely to have historic ties to the region, a relationship that is less likely associated with black migrants to the urban South. As a geographer I find these stories of place attachment and history to be significant in that regional relationships have survived the generations. That place is important in an age when technology and

globalism suggest otherwise is significant for students of regions. Finally, the rural South is an aspect of black return migration that has received relatively little attention in the thirty-year documentation of the phenomenon. Carol Stack's work is an important exception. Working with demographer John Cromartie, Stack spent several years doing ethnographic fieldwork in the Carolina coastal plain among the black return migrants there.

A central aim in this dissertation is to put black return migration into historical context. Most of the literature on this migration argues that the migration is rooted in two factors: the economic advances that have changed the South for the better in recent decades, and the improved racial climate that has reshaped the region in the years since the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s. Most commentators acknowledge that social and family relationships have contributed to the return; however, these observations are usually made as a footnote to what the writers believe are more important factors. Social and familial factors are difficult to ascertain with the available data, although Cromartie and Stack have pioneered some novel ways of using the Census Bureau's long form data to reveal these contextual relationships.

Because I am focusing on return migration to the Mississippi Delta, a place where there is little growth in the economy, I will focus on human relationships and connections to place as the main historical context that is driving return migration. Also, I will address the current racial situation in the Delta. Since so many observers of black return migration to the South attribute an improved racial climate in the region as an impetus for the return, I believe I should look at this issue as it relates to the Delta. The Delta is arguably where much of the post-Civil War patterns of black labor patterns

and white supremacy first appeared, so it makes it a significant place to examine how these factors are viewed by people in the region today, and how these views and realities have an impact on the quality and process of black return migration.

One problem in determining the importance and significance in black return migration is the realization of the fact that Americans of many races are moving into the South in large numbers. Since the 1970s, demographers and geographers have described this migration as a so-called Sunbelt Migration. As manufacturing jobs began to disappear in the North American Manufacturing Core, residents—both black and white—began to seek jobs in the growing industrial sector of the Southern economy. Much of this Southern job growth was due to Northern industrial decentralization. In search of lower taxation, lenient environmental policy, and a weak system of labor unions, Northern corporate leaders opened branch plants (or totally relocated) their manufacturing operations to the South, or more generally, the Sun Belt. In real numbers, whites moved to the South in greater numbers than blacks. One task for this dissertation is to discern white Sun Belt migration from black return migration.

People migrate for any number of reasons. Sometimes it involves dissatisfaction with a current residence, other times an attraction that another place holds for that individual. Common themes can bind populations providing them an identity as a migration group. Examples may include refugees fleeing war ravaged regions or populations leaving places as the result of some kind of environmental change. The stories of people may differ within groups, but may not differ enough to divorce them from their migration group. Whites leaving urban locations in the North and Northeast to find jobs that were lost in the Rust Belt do indicate that these migrants

belong to a unified movement: the Sun Belt Migration. African Americans, however, who follow the same migration patterns may bring with them different unified histories to the extent that they should be considered distinct within the larger movement of Americans.

One way to divide African Americans from other Sun Belt migrants is to consider the family histories of all migrants. For most subgroups of migrants it is impossible to attempt to answer such a question. For African Americans, however, the question is not difficult. Almost all blacks in the United States have familial roots in the American South. As late as 1900, more than 90 percent of all American blacks lived in the Southern states. Although slavery was abolished during the years of the Civil War, most former slaves and their descendents remained tied to the cotton economy. Few other American populations can claim such a unified geographic history. Accordingly, the prospect of any black returning to the South involves a geographic homecoming. This geography, combined with the fact that black families have generally maintained ties with their home places, makes migrants who return to these same places a significant object of geographic and humanistic study.

I mention the term, humanistic, in passing and at the end of the introduction, but it is central to the dissertation. With census data as a foundation, this dissertation will examine the lives and stories of many return migrants to the Mississippi Delta. I see this process as one that is best accomplished through the medium of ethnography. Ethnography is well suited to nurture a search for some degree of truth and meaning in a phenomenon that is well documented. This process is generally humanistic in that it is a project that places the human experience of this migration at the center of inquiry.

This dissertation seeks to put the words and lives of migrants in such a position as to steer the ultimate direction, meaning, and tone of the work.

CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN DIASPORA THROUGH MIGRATION LITERATURE

Considering Migration Theory

I will begin with an examination of some of what has been written about the Great Black Migration and the return migration of African Americans to the South. This section also will include a discussion of the historical geography of the South and of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta in a way that will put the black experience in this region into some context. To complete this migration background I will address the literature concerning migration theory as it relates to place selection and the notion of returning to a place. Migration is an important aspect of the human experience. Men and women have always wondered about other places over the next hill, beyond the horizon, even across the sea. Many people dream of what their own lives might become in those exotic places. This chapter looks at what scholars and writers have said about the themes and motivations that influence individual migration decisions. I consider also the geographical, structural, and data patterns that scholars have revealed as they have observed black migration streams over time. Finally, I comment on how these written precedents apply to the study of black return migration to the Mississippi Delta.

Findley and Li, in a 1999 piece in *The Professional Geographer*, make a case for a postmodernist approach to migration research. They argue that migration researchers ought to attempt to strike a balance between qualitative and quantitative methods. It may be that the academic tendency is to think that all things are new (postmodern), since the authors have come to such a common sense view of research:

that is, the best research is that which attempts to use all the interpretive tools that are available to unlock the mysteries of a given topic. Their argument holds that multi-method research will lead the migration researcher to deeper levels of meaning and understanding (Findley and Li 1999). I follow their lead in relying on a combination of census data, migration theory, and ethnography to make sense of black return migration to the Mississippi Delta.

Geographers have a long tradition of studying human migration, and there is a base in structural theory of migration on which to base any project concerned with the complex movements of groups of people. Theorists hold that migrations consist of two major elements: the decision to move and the decision of where to move (McHugh 1984). Both elements involve an appraisal of one's life in a place, and how it might change with geographic relocation. A view of migration that includes the life course of the migrant is helpful in making sense of both decisions, but may be most useful in understanding the initial decision to move. For black return migrants to the Mississippi Delta, the decision of where to move generally is simple since most return migrants to the Delta have a previous history with the place. The decision of whether or not to move is, however, a function of that person's position in his or her life cycle or career. For example, a worker who has been laid off from a job in the Midwest may decide to move to a family homeplace in the Delta, and thus, he or she will have affected a life course decision-making process in both their decision to move and in their choice of destination. On the other hand, a worker who is laid off of a job in the Midwest, and then takes another job in Atlanta—without having a prior connection to Atlanta—would

have affected a life course process also, but not in a way that is focused on family history and social connections.

Traditionally, geographers speak about migration in terms of push and pull factors: push factors being those things about a place that tend to cause one to consider moving away, while pull factors are qualities that draw one to a place. This model for examining migration is applicable and useful, even if it has shortcomings in illuminating the intent and experience of the migrant. For example, push factors may explain the ways that a resident of an urban housing project may wish to move to the South so as to enjoy space, nature, and a gentler community life. In the same example, pull factors (such as a family support mechanism) in the destination place may attract the mover and help explain the decision to migrate. The language of push and pull factors is useful in that it is broad enough to serve as a vessel for a wide range of migration theories. Standing alone, however, push-pull analysis seems hollow and can benefit from a theoretical underpinning that elucidates the character and quality of the migration in question. The concepts of push factors and pull factors provide a base from which to add richness and depth to the description and evaluation of varied migration decisions.

Two theoretical examples that lend themselves to analyzing black return migration are the life-course perspective and the biographical/auto-biographical approach to migration studies. The life-course perspective approach looks at migration decisions in light of the personal experience of the migrant. This perspective concentrates on those elements of his or her life that change over time, and those elements that are more static (Robison and Moen 2000). One view of an individual's

life is that it is a flow of events that leads through a set of situations of meaning and understandings. Migration often follows such life episodes. The death of a parent or the loss of a job may cause someone to also reevaluate his or her residential situation. A new love relationship or a spiritual awakening may, on the other hand, instigate a change in location so as to be with that love interest, or to find meaning and importance in another place. Within such personal experiences there are, no doubt, an implicit set of pushes and pulls, yet the language of location advantage and disadvantage seems to be a thin way of understanding the context of migration. True, a man or woman who may be the object of another's love may—indeed—be a pull factor in deciding to change location; it does not, however, provide the richness of understanding that comes with that story of human love. A person may, for example, follow another person from location to location over a period of years, and any analysis that failed to examine the nature of that relationship, in favor of limiting the study to possible pushes and pulls, would fail to find the central theme in that individual's peripatetic life.

In addition to their multi-method approach to migration theory, Findley and Li present a strong argument for autobiography as a way of analyzing migration decisions and processes. Although their research was geared toward the study of international migration, it has something important to say about internal migrations as well. Findley and Li are interested in exploring the ways that biographies elicited from migrants themselves can reveal contextual meanings about their places of origin, destination, and their thinking about the migration decision-making process. Since migration is an intensely personal decision, and one that almost always involves a great amount of stress, a researcher ought to give attention to the migrant's life in, as much as is

possible, its totality. Only in considering the migrant's values, beliefs, dreams, hopes, and desires can the researcher begin to understand the significance of that migration decision and its full impact on the person, and perhaps, the place (Findley and Li 1999). In my experience, I have seen return migrants to the Mississippi Delta become vocal personalities in the community with much to say about their views and concerns for the communities that they have either joined or rejoined.

Findley and Le's search is not one of discerning universal meanings in migration, but of uncovering place and person-specific meanings where those stories are created and lived (Findley and Li 1999). This method is one that seeks to find the subtlety and meaning that exists behind census data and researcher interpretation done inside the walls of the university or research institution. In many ways, these ideas are recycled assertions of notions long held by ethnographers, novelists, artists, and scholars in other fields. Perhaps geographers have moved so far from this methodological terrain that they need to become reacquainted with its uses and implications.

Finding a grounding theory for black return migration to the Mississippi Delta poses a small problem when one looks to traditional models of migration research. These models are usually based on rational economic theory, which posits that migration decisions are made in light of one's attempt to improve his or her financial and career situation. For most people who return to live in a poor region like the Mississippi Delta, there are usually non-economic factors behind the decision. As such, economically based models are relatively useless (Jobes, Stinner, and Wardwell 1992).

Among the scholars who have recognized such problems in migration research are anthropologist Carol Stack and geographer John Cromartie. Instead of using traditional economic models, Stack and Cromartie employed a place utility concept of migration. The notion of place utility says that places hold value and meaning for potential migrants in a number of ways. The utility of a place is the value that it holds for an individual, whether economic, social, or familial. A place like the Mississippi Delta may be a homeplace or a region in which one seeks a quiet rural refuge from the chaos of the inner city. The place may be where one has an extended family or community that one may rely upon in a time of need. Such reliance may be in the form of childcare, financial help, or immediate emotional support. Perhaps the place in question may hold value for a person in his or her professional career, but it is not central to the decision to move. Usually this concept relates to how the migrant views a location as helping advance a personal goal. Although this aspect of the place utility concept is suited to thinking about career and economic goals, it can be applied to any goal, such as one aimed at fulfilling a family obligation or attaining satisfaction through belonging to a community of people (Stack and Cromartie 1989).

Place utility is usually divided into two categories with each classified according to the criteria that the potential migrant uses to judge the places. One involves a lifetime of information gathered about various places. These may be places that an individual has visited (such as a vacation spot), or a place that one has learned about through someone else's descriptions (such as a parent's remembrance of a homeplace). This type of place preference is particularly subject to spatial stereotyping. A person may come to regard an entire state or a particular region—like Mississippi or the

Delta—as a place of pain and suffering or as a place of familial support and comfort.

The second category involves information that a potential migrant has gathered about other, previously unknown, places. These places become a search space for the person considering a move. Curtis Roseman notes that people engaged in a decision-making process tend to have two locations in mind: one that is a previous residential location, or a family homeplace, the other an option in the newly established search space (Roseman 1977). Black return migrants are mostly grouped in the first of the two major categories since most are well acquainted with the Delta through family lore or previous residence.

For many return migrants to the Mississippi Delta, the Delta became a refuge at some turning point in a life's work. In their life experience, they knew of a handful of places that might possibly provide an opportunity at a given time. While the national scene might hold possibilities in any number of locations, those locations might seem unattainable or impossible, and thus they return home to the Delta. In Carol Stack's beautiful account of black return migration to Coastal Carolina, she writes again and again of the theme that when people's lives come to a dead end, and they find themselves lost, they often go back to the place where they last knew their role. For these migrants, the utility of place is its function as a home, a sanctuary (Stack 1996).

The human capital theory of migration may have a tangential role to play in explaining the decision making process of blacks returning to the Delta. The notion of human capital migration is that a migrant considers the move in terms of how a change in location will have a positive or negative impact on his or her career or economic life course. Generally, this theoretical framework is employed to understand migrations to new jobs or career opportunities. There may be examples in black return migration to

the Delta in which the returnee has improved his or her financial situation or career, but this is generally not the case. Since black return migration to the Mississippi Delta does not tend to be an economic migration, the human capital model must be thought of in a slightly different way. Black return migrants usually make a decision to move to the region with a clear understanding that the move is going to bring with it financial and career costs. A daughter, for example, who has a high paying job in the North, may be compelled to come home to the Delta to care for a sick parent. From the point of view of the mover, the decision will make almost no sense financially. That mover may calculate that the decision to move will put their career on hold while they are away—a view that implies that the mover does not plan to stay. That mover may even face the difficult reality that that parent may not live long, and thus, their responsibility in the region will be short lived. Career factors are part of this hypothetical decision scheme, but not a determinant. Such a migration decision process is contrary to the usual way that the human capital model is employed, but has relevance nonetheless.

Another useful way of thinking about why blacks are returning to the Delta is to consider regional culture as a factor in their decision making process. The Delta has been a black majority region since it was first settled as cotton planting territory in the early 1800s (Willis 2000). At the time that this agricultural system came to fruition, many counties in the Delta had a ten to one black population majority. This demographic quality helps to explain why the region became a hearth for many of the cultural developments attributed to African American culture. Delta blues music and black folk medicines are two, often intertwined, examples. For example, Muddy Waters is well known for his impassioned wail:

I got a black cat bone, I got a mojo too.
 I got the John the Conqueror root,
 and I'm gonna' mess with you. (Waters 1954)

Interviews with the musician reveal that he was sly and ambivalent about his beliefs in these Delta folk arts and medicines. These types of mystical folk traditions are difficult to find in the Delta today, although most blacks have personal acquaintance with them, often through a parent or grandparent. In most cases, these personal experiences are associated with folk medicine rather than with charms like mojos and roots. Beyond such powerful and provocative traditions as these, blacks in the Delta participate in, and perpetuate, a distinct form of social interaction that is regional in nature.

Confrontational verbal games like "the dozens," and sacred hymn forms like "Dr. Watts'" singing are in far greater evidence in the Delta than in urban locations outside the region. The Delta, with its remoteness and relative isolation, has served to provide a sheltering harbor for many dying forms of black folk culture. That the Delta is a place where African Americans feel an ownership of regional culture, and that they may find comfort in the racial power of numbers, almost is beyond dispute.

Some scholars note that regional culture can be a powerful factor in migration destination selection. In studying the migration of Mormons to Utah, Kontuly and Smith established that migrants who immigrated to the state from the farthest distances were more likely to report a familial connection, and an affinity for, Mormon culture. I believe that the same conclusion could be reached in looking at black return migrants to the Mississippi Delta. In fact, in all of the interviews that I conducted among black migrants to the Mississippi Delta, not once did I encounter an individual who moved to the region without some prior personal connection. Time and again, migrants spoke to

me of the importance of place, family, and home as the primary reason for them moving to the Delta. Even in those cases where the return migrant was unhappy with their new life in the Delta, they said that the initial decision to come to the region had been influenced by their historic ties to the place and its culture (Kontuly and Smith 1995).

The Laws of Migration

E. G. Ravenstein's *Laws of Migration* papers are more than one hundred years old, but still retain relevance, and should be addressed by any study in migration. Although it may be an exaggeration to consider any human endeavor to be subject to behavioral laws, Ravenstein's observations do provide insight. Ravenstein's work was based on emigration data from Europe in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Even though the study of black return migration to the Mississippi Delta is not an international migration, there are several points in this historic work that are worth mention (Jackson 1969).

First, Ravenstein argues that migrations of great distances are likely to end in relocation to a large urban area. Looking at the Great Migration of blacks out of the South in the years after World War I, one finds Ravenstein's hypothesis to be well taken. Most black migrants out of the rural South did, in fact, find new homes in the urban North and West. Second, the *Laws of Migration* posits that migration tends to progress in a series of moves, each to a larger urban setting (Jackson 1969). Carole Marks makes the case in *Farewell, We're Good and Gone* that this was true for black migrants in the South. She notes that most rural blacks first came to live in the cities of the South before going on to cities outside the region (Marks 1989). My own observations among return migrants reveal a similar pattern. For example, census data

show that between 1955 and 1960, 2,456 African Americans moved from the Mississippi Delta to Memphis, Tennessee (Roseman 1977).

Another observation in Ravenstein's work is his assertion that migration streams produce counter-streams. Ravenstein cites several possible reasons for the appearance of counter-stream migrations. One reason may be that the positive factors that attracted the migrant to the destination in the first place may undergo some basic change. Economic depression may negate the advantage that the destination once held, or the migrant may reevaluate the costs and benefits associated with the migration decision (Jackson 1969). Geographically, the migration opens, or accentuates, social linkages between the destination and the point of origin such that there may be a constant exchange of ideas and information between people in each location. If, at some future point, the migrant feels that his or her newly acquired skills and life experiences may make life in the origin location an attractive alternative, the migrant may return. This notion is a twist on the old saying that says if one can make it in New York, one can make it anywhere—even in one's homeplace. Finally, descendents of the migrant born in the destination may gain information and experience about the homeplace, and choose to set up residence there.

Culture, Return Migration, and Memories of Home

Migration inevitably brings with it questions about the ways that culture is maintained, and undergoes change, as a result of geographic relocation (Kontuly and Smith 1995). The case of black migration between the Mississippi Delta and urban destinations outside the region provides many examples of the ways that culture has withstood the change of space and time. Black migrants from the rural South responded

to their geographic changes much like European immigrants to North America did. They settled in ethnic neighborhoods that came to be dominated and populated by people of similar background.

Chicago's South Side is a fine example of dense congregations of ethnically similar people living within prescribed spatial confines (Lemann 1991). In the early years of the twentieth century the South Side experienced explosive growth as thousands of black rural Southerners—many from the Mississippi Delta—disembarked at Union Station to begin their new life in the city. While crowding and deplorable living conditions were common, there was some comfort in being submerged in an ethnic enclave. As these immigrants made their way into the city, the echoes of the South that lay all around them would have comforted them. The smell of pork—perhaps even chitterlings—cooking would have been as familiar as the sound of a blues combo crashing out of the smoky saloons on Maxwell Street. It is even likely that some migrants would have gone into clubs to hear a musician like Muddy Waters or Elmore James, the same musicians that they might have heard years before in Mississippi. Late in the evening, as the whisky dulled their senses and the smoke clouded their eyes, they might have forgotten that they were hundreds of miles from their home in the Delta. Only the cold and windy streets outside would have reminded them of their new location.

Another example of cultural maintenance is found in the numerous social clubs in the North and West that are based on Southern towns and cities. For example, the Greenville Club of Chicago is comprised of Chicago residents who are former migrants from the Delta town of Greenville, or are related to someone who is. They meet

throughout the year to enjoy one another's company and to share what it means to live in Chicago while being linked to the Delta. Each summer they charter a bus to visit Greenville. In fact, the club owns a building in Greenville that serves as their social center and ballroom while they are home. Their annual journey was the subject of the recent film, *Homecoming*. The filmmakers accompanied the club on the bus as they made the trip from Illinois to Mississippi (Gilbert 1998). While the film misses entirely the existence of a Great Return Migration, it does a beautiful job of documenting the linkages that bind many migrants with roots in the Delta.

Food is another important way that Southern blacks living outside their home region keep traditional culture alive. One theme that comes up often in conversations with black return migrants and their families is that often they tried to hold on to Southern cooking while they were away. Several years ago I met a family in the Memphis airport who were seeing their grandmother off at the gate. Although they were reserved, and maybe even visibly sad to see their loved one leaving, they did not seem to mind talking about being return migrants to the Delta. After their grandmother's plane had pulled away from the gate, we walked out of the concourse into the bright sunlight of an autumn afternoon. The subject turned to food. The man, who was a high school teacher in the Delta after many years in the Detroit public school system, said that they "don't dare" visit up north without bringing some Mississippi catfish. He argued that his mother, who still lives in Detroit, could taste the difference in catfish caught in her native Mississippi Delta—even if the supermarket variety is farm raised in the Delta. He also mentioned that his mother always asks him to bring her some garden greens. Another return migrant mentioned to me that her mother likes

to eat and cook “soul food” but that her tastes run toward more mainstream American fare. Such stories testify to the emotive power of food and the memory of place. Places are not only seen and remembered; they are tasted.

The Chicken Bone Express

The Illinois Central’s main line runs from Chicago to New Orleans. Indeed, this route is one of the main reasons that the Delta became a dominant agricultural region. Railroad engineers chose the Delta’s nearly nonexistent grades as an ideal and cheap way to get heavy loads to and from the Gulf of Mexico and Chicago (Brandfon 1967). Traditionally, this line has been called *The City of New Orleans*. It was even made famous by a folk song of the same name.

Good morning America how are you?
Say, don’t you know me; I’m your native son.
I am the train they call the City of New Orleans,
I’ll be gone five hundred miles when the day is done. (Goodman 1972)

Many people, however, call the route between the two great cities, “The Chicken Bone Express.” A large portion of its riders are African Americans who use the train to shuttle back and forth between the industrial Midwest and their native Lower Mississippi River valley. In myth, if not reality, the train is called by the chicken bone moniker because African American riders have traditionally packed meals for their journeys that consisted of fried chicken. After the travelers had disembarked (so the myth states), railroad employees had to gather the remains of countless box lunches strewn about the cars and under the seats. Myths are curious things that may, or may not, have roots in fact, but this myth seems to indicate a geographic linkage and its associated human geography in a way that is as descriptive as it is questionable. The

railroad term brushes the bounds of racial stereotype and epithet, but nonetheless, had some basis in popular culture.

Historical Geography of the Great Black Migration

Moses, my servant, is dead: now therefore arise, go over
this Jordan, thou and all this people, unto the land
which I do give to them even to the children of Israel.

Joshua 1:2

I got the key to the highway,
yes I'm billed out and bound to go,
I'm gonna leave here runnin',
'cause walkin' is mos' too slow.

Big Bill Broonsey, *Key to the Highway*

It is likely that this passage from Joshua provided inspiration for people like Big Bill Broonzy, who long had viewed their story as similar to that of the ancient Jews. For African Americans on the eve of the Great Migration, however, no land had been given to them by God or the United States government; their forty acres and a mule never materialized. Black Americans moved to take, by migration, what they believed to be rightfully theirs as citizens. Economic independence, political acknowledgement, and a role in America's growing industrial system drew millions of Southern blacks to the urban North and West. The Great Migration was as much a journey toward a human, or democratic, ideal as it was a flight from a Southern reality (Gottlieb 1991).

This subsection has two goals. The first is to outline the geographic patterns of the Great Black Migration as they unfolded between 1910 and 1970. Black migration will be examined at the micro scale, that is, within the South, and at the macro scale migration of blacks out of the region. Census data and geographic interpretations will be used to address these patterns of migration. The second goal of the subsection is to

identify the larger process of the Great Black Migration in terms of historical geography and theoretical context. This systematic view of the process will help to bring order to a process that involves the migration decisions of over six million African Americans.

While each migration story is unique to the individual involved, it is possible to recognize themes in motivation and pattern on a larger scale (Trotter 1991). Where it is possible, the strengths and weaknesses of each view will be discussed. The subsection will conclude with an argument regarding a synthesis, based on citizenship, of the major structural views of the Great Black Migration.

The Origin and Scale of the Great Black Migration

The Great Black Migration, as referred to in this dissertation, is understood as the movement of Southern blacks to locations in the North and West, between 1910 and 1970. Traditionally, the term Great Migration has been used to refer to the earliest migration of blacks from the South, a movement that occurred from 1910 to 1930 (Kirby 1983). A modification of the term Great Migration, to Great Black Migration, considers the entirety of the sixty-year Southern out-migration (Lemann 1991).

The South, as a region, will be defined as the Census South that includes the eleven states of the original Secessionist South plus the border states of Delaware, Kentucky, the District of Columbia, Maryland, Oklahoma, and West Virginia.

Although it may be problematic to include the Border States in a discussion of the South, especially the District of Columbia, it will serve to include those migrants who might have experienced similar social, economic, and political motivations as those in the Secessionist South (Kirby 1983).

Between 1910 and 1970, more than six million African Americans migrated from the South to locations in the North and West (Table 1) (Kirby 1983). A large body of scholarly and popular literature has documented this process, positioning it as one of the great migrations in human history. As an internal migration, in actual numbers of movers, the Great Black Migration is more significant than any single ethnic migration of Europeans to the United States (Lemann 1991). A migration of this magnitude changed the cultural geography of the United States in major ways that continue to resonate in popular culture, national policy discussions, and political representation. Before the beginning of the migration, to be black in America, in general, was to be Southern and rural. Of the total United States black population in 1880, 80.9 percent lived in the rural South. Including the urban black population of the South, 90.5 percent of blacks lived in the region. By 1960, the South was home to only 59.9 percent of the country's total black population (Heinicke 1994). By 1970, at the end of the migration, 50 percent of the African Americans in the United States lived in the South. In journalist Nicholas Lemann's words, "urban" had become a euphemism for "black" (Lemann 1991)." For example, even today, urban contemporary music is a phrase used in radio marketing for rap and hip-hop music, both African American art forms.

Table 1: Net Out-Migration from the Thirteen State South (In Thousands), 1910-1960

1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s
1042.2	1589.1	1147.5	2472.3	2815.9

While the literature is more extensive on the black migration before 1930, it should be noted that the migration peaked after World War II. Between 1940 and 1960, three million Southern blacks moved to the North and West. Ten-year migration totals before 1940 had not reached one million. Lemann argues that the migration figures

after World War II were larger due to the increasing use of mechanical cotton pickers, thus producing an African American labor surplus in the South. Peter Gottlieb has described the post 1944 black migration as one of "resignation and despair (Gottlieb 1991)."

There are several aspects of the Great Black Migration that ought to be understood since these structures have shaped the manner and ordering of the Great Return Migration. The first among them is the geography of the paths chosen by black migrants during their exodus from the South. Three corridors of Southern out-migration emerged. Rural blacks throughout the Appalachian Piedmont and Atlantic Coastal Plain tended to follow a migration path to the Northeast. For these migrants, the cities of Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston served as places to establish an urban life. For African Americans of the Gulf Coast Plain and Lower Mississippi Valley, a northward route developed, leading to such cities as St. Louis, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit. A third, if somewhat weaker, channel evolved between Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, to the Pacific Coast of California. The three routes followed natural geographies and existing transportation routes. Rail lines, and later highways, run the length of the Atlantic Coast and served to guide the movement of migrants to the Northeast. Similarly, the Illinois Central, and later United States Highway 61, parallels the Mississippi river from the Great Lakes to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. Likewise, Southern rail lines and highways connect the Gulf Coast with Southern California and the Pacific coast. Each of these corridors remain conduits for black Southerners and their non-Southern kin as they travel back and forth in the

process of maintaining ties of place and relationships in the wake of the migrations of the 1900s (McHugh 1987).

Theoretical Frameworks of the Great Black Migration

Carole Marks argues that a theoretical underpinning is useful in the study of black migration to bring order to a process that might otherwise be mistaken for millions of random and unrelated decisions. While each migration is as unique as the migrant involved, their geographic patterns and similar life stories imply that a conceptual framework is applicable (Marks 1989). Concepts can be derived from various social sciences to achieve a historical geography of the Great Black Migration. Three of the more valuable theoretical paradigms used in the study of twentieth century black migration are the race relations model, the ghetto model, and the race/class or proletarian approach. Each approach has been dominant in the sub-field at various points through the years, although each continues to have relevance in an inclusive study of the topic (Trotter 1991).

The Race Relations Model

The earliest of the models is the race relations model that arose before 1900 in the writings of W.E.B. DuBois. His approach was to examine the emerging black population of Philadelphia in relation to increasing racial tension in the city. DuBois's primary goal was to determine where the black population had come from and when it had begun to arrive. He and other observers in this period were concerned that the new black population was unprepared, and perhaps incapable, of employment in the urban economy of the Northeast. The race relations approach focused on black migration only to the extent that it affected conditions in Northern cities, not as a means to explain why

blacks were leaving the South. The model did not seek to illuminate the larger pattern of black migration or the migrations that had been ongoing in the Southern black community (Trotter 1991).

As the Great Migration unfolded during World War I, scholars added to the race relations model an element that would be carried forward to the present. This argument held that in large measure the migration resulted from the “push factor” of inequality in the South. Adherents to the argument believed that African American migrants fled racial oppression in their native region as much as they sought greater economic opportunities in the North. Elements of this paradigm can be found in observers of the current return migration of blacks to the South, who argue that the return is due, in part, to the improved racial climate of today's South (Grossman 1989).

One criticism of the race relations model is that it does not address a long history of black migration within the South. The model also ignores the existence of familial and social networks between Northern and Southern blacks that have helped sustain interregional migrations since their beginning. Another problem in the model is that it does not address black migration as its object; it takes race relations as its object, thus minimizing the complexities of the migration process (Trotter 1991).

There were those in the era of its origin who objected to this race-based view of black migration. Writing in the National Urban League's *Opportunity* in 1923, Charles S. Johnson pointed out that racial persecution seemed to be a minor factor in black migration to the North. In support of his argument, he noted that the earliest voluntary black migrations were to the south and west, to the expanding agricultural areas of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta and East Texas. His point was that if persecution were the

primary motivation for migration, the movement would have been northward, not south and west within the Southern states. Johnson also notes that those counties shown to have been the location for most lynchings of blacks were also counties that experienced greater out-migrations of whites, in comparison to out-migration of blacks, the adverse of what might be expected. The article's thesis is that migrants to the North were moving toward opportunity more than they were moving away from adversity. His message was directed at the leaders of Northern industry, who were in a position to determine the employability of black migrants. This distinction also was important to prospective Southern black workers who wanted to be viewed as willing movers in the national labor scene, not refugee victims of racial oppression (Johnson 1923).

The Ghetto Model

The 1940s and 1950s saw relatively little scholarship on the Great Black Migration. Much of the reluctance to address the process can be attributed to an avoidance of systematic views concerning social patterns during the Cold War. Matters of race and class were seen generally as unapproachable subjects in this era of United States history. America shunned divisions that existed in the country's political life: politicians hoped to present a united front to the Soviet Union and members of the political left. As political debate in the country moved to the left during the 1960s, scholars of black migration began to look at their subject with a renewed interest in social systems. The growth of black ghettos emerged to drive a new paradigm in the study of black migration (Trotter 1991).

Under the presidential administrations of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon (an improbably liberal figure when compared to our more conservative political climate

today), the black ghettos of America became a central focus in the War on Poverty (Lemann 1991). In this discussion, many argued, black migration was understood to have produced the modern Northern ghetto. The ghetto was the object of the study, and the Great Black Migration itself was of secondary importance. As with the race relation's model, the ghetto model was not concerned with the migration process on its own merits, but as a means to reveal the origins of some other phenomenon. This misdirected focus created problems for an accurate understanding of the migration process. Social networks and the historical geography of earlier African American migrations were not emphasized, thus resulting in a superficial understanding of the migration process (Trotter 1991).

The ghetto model is similar to Burgess's Chicago School of urban sociologists in its view of urban structure. With respect to the Burgess model, African Americans compared to an ethnic immigrant community (which is not far off the mark) competing for urban space in a radiating pattern of residential settlement. In fact, Burgess clearly identifies the Black Belt, a region extending south from the Chicago Loop, toward his "zone of better residences." While the ghetto model was new to black migration studies, it was a concept familiar to the students of the University of Chicago's urban sociologists (Knox 1994).

Although published in 1991, Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land* is based on this model of black migration. He describes the black ghettos of Chicago as "among the worst places to live in the world." He does not, however, fail to consider the impact of familial networks or the historical context of the Southern black experience. *The Promised Land* is largely the story of three migrants from the Delta town of Clarksdale,

Mississippi. Their stories begin in Mississippi during the 1940s and conclude with their return migration to the Delta in the 1980s. Lemann's central argument is that the urban pathologies of the black ghetto have their origins in the oppressive plantation system. His view of the Great Black Migration sees the ghetto as one stop along the path toward participation in the black, indeed American, middle class. It is this notion of black residential upward mobility that places Lemann's work in the Chicago School's tradition. As such, Lemann's view is balanced in the use of the ghetto model, with proper attention given to the complex pattern of black migration and social assimilation (Lemann 1991). *The Promised Land* shows how a paradigm synthesis can be a novel approach to understanding the process of black migration.

Although *The Promised Land* probably reached a larger audience than any previous work on the Great Black Migration, it had many detractors. One of the things that led Lemann to write about black migration was his interest, based in classical Northeast Liberalism, in the urban underclass. Writing in an era of growing political conservatism under the Reagan Administration, he believed that the poor in America were being ignored and unfairly characterized as being the cause of their own economic deprivation. In what came to be called the "sharecropper thesis," Lemann argued that there were striking parallels between black migration from the rural South to Northern cities and a marked growth in the underclass in those places. This argument was singled out for intense criticism on several fronts.

Lemann's critics fault him for suggesting that the Great Black Migration was, in part, a failure. The criticism rests on the question of where the social pathologies present in black ghettos originated. Lemann suggests that these urban problems were

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transplanted from the sharecropping system of the South, a system that held blacks in semi-slavery for nearly a century after the Civil War. Lemann points to the post-Civil War system of agriculture in which sharecroppers, many of whom were former slaves, endured decades of hard labor, crushing debt, disenfranchisement, violence, peonage, and political repression. He argues that this system led to the decay of family structures, and that other social problems were related to the poor education that most blacks were afforded. In an argument reminiscent of W.E.B. DuBois, Lemann writes that these former sharecroppers were not prepared to deal with the economic and social demands of the city, and thus became residents of a number of inner city ghettos. To compound the problem, he argues, city officials in the North and West affected geographic strategies that kept poor blacks confined to certain parts of their cities, thereby increasing the numbers and concentrations of blacks living in ghettos. The strategic placement of United States Interstate Ninety and Ninety-four served to restrict the westward expansion of Chicago's predominately black South Side (Lemann 1991).

Countering the sharecropping thesis were scholars and researchers like geographer Clyde Woods and social scientist David Whitman. Whitman believes that the Great Black Migration should be understood as a success and a victory, and that the social pathologies in black ghettos are more the result of city life itself (Whitman 1991). Some evidence suggests that Whitman and others may have a valid argument. Recent analysis of historic census data shows that sharecropper families in the rural South tended to be more stable and that those non-migrants living in the urban North were more likely to live in households where only one parent cared for the children (Tolnay 1997). As a quantitative sociologist, Whitman claims numbers like these as

evidence in support of his argument, while Lemann believes that his own reporting among actual residents of the ghetto provide a more accurate picture of the black migration process. Lemann points out that the prospect of finding a black “non-migrant” in a place like Chicago is difficult since so many black residents there are likely to be the children and grandchildren of migrants, and therefore, be steeped in sharecropping’s legacy through their family histories (Lemann 1991a, 1991b).

Race/Class or Proletarian Model

The proletarian model explains the Great Black Migration as a function of international capitalism and the birth of a Northern black working class. The model relates economics, imperialism, and war in Europe, to labor shortages and black migration in America. The unique aspect of the model is its assertion that African Americans participated in a monumental migration through a response to economic forces operating on a global scale. Black migration decisions are seen in this paradigm as identical to other migrations in which employment was the major pull factor. It places the black migration experience in the American mainstream of economic behavior, rather than placing African Americans in a separate category with respect to settlement geography. Race is not ignored in the model, as some scholars have argued that African American participation in the labor movement was influenced by their unifying experience as a racial minority (Grossman 1989).

In 1919, the *Journal of Negro History* published a collection of letters sent to black newspapers and Afro-American advocacy groups by Southern blacks seeking information about Northern employment (Scott 1919). The letters reveal a desire for

individual betterment and economic opportunity. One letter written in Decatur, Alabama, on April 25, 1917, to the Chicago Urban League read:

Gentlemen: Gentlemens desious of Settling in Some Small Northern Town With a moderate Population & also Where a Colored man may open a business Also where one may receive fairly good wedges for a While ontill well enough azainted with Place to do a busiseness in other words Wonts to locate in Some Coming town Were agoodyly no, of colard People is. Wonts to Work at Some occupation ontill I can arrange for other buiseness Just Give Me information As to the best placers for a young buiseness Negro to locate & make good. in. Any Northern State

Thanking you inavance any information you may give in regards to Labor & buiseness Location Also when good schools or in operation Please address

P.S. answer this at once as I plain to leave the South by May the 3rd. I can furnish best reffreces. (Scott 1919, 303)

Another letter written on May 25, 1917 in Charleston, South Carolina reads:

Dear Sirs: Having heard of you through a friend of mine, I thought that I would would write asking you to please send me full information as to conditions and chances for the advancement of the negro in the north. I am seeking for the opportunity and chance of advancement as far as my ability is capable as I am a negro myself. I Would like very much to get in touch with you if think that you can give me some assistance along the line which I have spoken. (Scott 1919, 296)

By placing black workers at the center of their study, advocates of the proletarian model moved closer to a full analysis of black migration as a dynamic process rooted in Southern culture and experience. Peter Gottlieb portrays the migration as a "process of self-transformation." Gottlieb's work focuses on black seasonal labor migrations and industrial experience in the South before the Great Migration. He argues that these early encounters with industrial capitalism prepared Southern blacks for migrations of greater geographic and temporal scale. Gottlieb is also interested in African American patterns of work and migration in the years between

1865 and 1910, before the goal of Southern land ownership had been abandoned (Gottlieb 1991).

James Grossman's book on the Great Migration, *Land of Hope*, considers blacks to be architects of a grass-roots movement to achieve the fruits of American citizenship through industrial capitalism. His account of the migration stresses the importance of familial and social networks that directed migration to the North (Grossman 1989). Validation of this argument can be seen in the continued, although slower, migration of blacks out of the South during the Great Depression, an era of fewer industrial opportunities (Kirby 1983). Employment was not the main object of migration in the 1930s, friends and family were. Grossman also comments on the disillusionment many migrants experienced as they realized that their role in the industrial system was often at the margins of meaningful employment (Grossman 1989). Jobs that required limited skills were often the only options for African American laborers. Oftentimes this work involved cleaning, a job many Southern black men considered to be "women's work (Scott 1999)." An attitude prevailed among many employers that black workers were loyal, but largely ill suited for high skilled positions. Thus, many of the jobs blacks secured often were at the periphery of the industrial labor force, in the least desirable positions (Heinicke 1994). Referring to slaughter house work in Chicago's meat packing industry, Howling Wolf (Chester Burnett) comments on the hardships of such employment:

God knows, I should'a been gone.
 God knows, I should'a been gone.
 Then I wouldn't have been here,
 down on the killin' floor. (Burnett 1964)

A Marxist Approach to the Great Black Migration

Some analyses of the Great Black Migration have been more radical than any mentioned so far. Clyde Woods's work is one example. Woods's work draws from Marxist theory to depict the black experience in the Mississippi Delta. Central to his critique is his argument that the Great Black Migration was more an expulsion than a voluntary relocation. He begins by making the novel argument that pre-Civil War plantation agriculture in the American South was an early form of American capitalism, perhaps the earliest, and that African Americans were the country's first great proletariat. Others point out that, by definition, the capitalist model must involve a worker class that has the right to choose how to execute its labor, a choice that enslaved blacks did not have. Woods acknowledges this argument, but fails to counter it. Nevertheless, the Marxist thinking found in his book *Development Arrested* (1999) sets the stage for viewing black migration decisions in the years after emancipation as being linked to the exigencies of capitalist America. Blacks in the South were a component of a white-dominated economic system, and the fact that blacks constructed an ancestral homeplace under such conditions testifies to the ability of people to have intense and conflicting notions about place. Cast in this light, the Delta seems an unlikely place for blacks to love and return to again and again over the generations. Perhaps this differs little from any immigrant class that moves to an undesirable place that can provide them with an economic livelihood, but a clear distinction exists. Blacks in America were afforded only those positions that whites (who controlled production) would allow them. This kind of employment restriction was, and to some extent is, unique to people of color. White Poles and Italians, for example, may dilute their ethnic separateness

through time and acculturation, while people of African descent remain easily identifiable, and thus easily excludable. In the early days of the United States blacks were, with few exceptions, relegated to a life of work in the rural South, a geographic pattern that did not begin to change appreciably until the twentieth century (Litwack 1998).

With this ethnic geography in mind, Woods notes that white planters always considered blacks, even after Emancipation, little more than another line item on their ledger sheets. Accounts of social and political life in the South after the Civil War refer to the “Negro problem.” This problem seems, on paper, to be an obstacle to agricultural profits just as was inclement weather or plant infestations. Many historians have pointed out that planters during and after Reconstruction sought numerous ways to become less dependent on black labor, or the “Negro problem.” Greenville writer David Cohn goes as far as to refer to the Delta as “Negro obsessed.” He writes of the Delta in his foreword to *Where I was Born and Raised*:

I knew that it was still a land of huge plantations, feudalistic in many ways, cotton-intoxicated, Negro obsessed, fearing the wrath of God and the Mississippi River. Here are more Negroes in proportion to whites than elsewhere in the United States. (Cohn 1948, vii)

In light of this pattern of race thinking, Woods contends that planters did their best to rid the Delta of blacks as soon as they had a way to replace their labor. Roosevelt’s New Deal, Woods points out, provided planters just such an opportunity. With the Delta receiving a flood of federal dollars, planters implemented a plan of mechanization that rendered most blacks in the region superfluous to the area’s economy, save for those domestic services found in white homes and towns. Census data suggest that approximately 30 percent of black tenants were evicted from their homes in 1933.

Woods uses the term “plantation bloc” throughout his book to refer to the group of economic and political interests in the Delta that has always held sway over the region’s economic life. He includes those involved directly in crop production and a broad array of forces in the region that are tied to the land through common financial interest, a group that includes most moneyed interests in the Delta. Bankers, lawyers, farm implements dealers, and insurance companies are among the many Woods includes in his definition of plantation bloc. Woods argues that this entity has direct links to the old power structure in the Delta that perpetrated acts of political and economic terrorism under the guise of local law enforcement, the Ku Klux Klan, and the white Citizens Council. Woods’s work argues that this plantation bloc is more than an imagined community of economic interests, but is a quasi-organization, and in cases, has an established face. An example of such an organization includes the Delta Council, a lobbying group of Delta farmers and businesspeople. In more impassioned sections, he argues that the plantation was, and is, the effective government, regardless of who happens to be in elective office—no small matter since the African American rise to political power (Parker 1999). Woods argues that the plantation bloc began to discuss openly the possibility of expelling African Americans (building on the migration wrought by implementation of the AAA of 1933) from the Delta as early as 1935 (Woods 1998).

A Case for the Citizenship Model

Each of the aforementioned paradigms has a role in explaining the underlying structure of the Great Black Migration. As noted, however, each has certain shortcomings. I make an argument for a modification and synthesis of the paradigms to

outline a theoretical foundation in historical geography. A model based on the spatial decisions of migrants in pursuit of full American citizenship can consolidate the diverse issues covered in the existing conceptual frameworks.

Migration is a process that involves a complex set of judgments based on various push and pull factors, life course analyses, and human creativity. For the Great Black Migration, it is difficult to emphasize one factor over another. Each migrant would cite the various factors in his or her own way. By placing the emphasis on the migrant's desire to participate in American democracy and its dominant economic system, each factor can be highlighted. With each potential factor, there is a coexisting geographic pattern to be found in a regional context. The demand for citizenship—including a fair chance to earn a living—and equal opportunity under the law is usually at the center of most geographic decisions in the Great Black Migration.

If race is taken to be a cause for migration, one can argue that the migrant had come to believe that what the United States purported to be was not found in the South in the early twentieth century (Powdermaker 1939). In 1900 there was a geographic pattern to Jim Crow, and reaction to that system was a factor that led blacks out of the region. There was, apparently, a wish among African American freedmen and women to remain in the South. This wish reveals itself in the lag time between emancipation and the beginning of large-scale out-migration of African Americans after the turn of the century, a period of forty-five years. Blacks were not ready to give up their homeplaces—imbued with the horrid legacy of slavery though it was—until the promise of freedom had been tested. As the federal aims of Reconstruction failed for

African Americans, the way was set for a historic geographic movement (Gottlieb 1991).

The proletarian model argues that Northern industrial development drew Southern blacks into its fold to create a black working class (Trotter 1991). A citizenship model demands a slightly different notion of the process, a process by which African Americans are acting in their own interest, rather than as subjects of the capitalist system. Blacks in the South observed a growing industrial base outside their home region just when the hopelessness of sharecropping began to be evident (Cobb 1992). To claim a share of the country's industrial future, blacks in the national periphery migrated to the economic core (Gottlieb 1991). African Americans claimed capitalism; capitalism did not claim African Americans. This active engagement is expressed better using the idea of citizenship than with economic world systems.

Black ghettos in the United States grew proportionally with the Great Black Migration. Incorporating the ghetto model of migration with the citizenship model requires one to address chain migration and the growth of the black middle class. For many, the black ghetto is a generational heritage made more permanent by the many urban pathologies present there. Inadequate schools and geographic isolation combine to make it difficult to escape ghetto life. Nonetheless, thousands have left the ghetto to enter the ranks of the American middle class. In this sense, the ghetto can be seen as a transit point in a larger migration story that has as its goal full participation in North American capitalism and democracy (Lemann 1991). Using the concepts of E. W. Burgess, the ghetto serves its purpose as cheap residential housing for newly arrived immigrants with little rent paying ability. The process continues as the migrant, or the

second-generation migrant, attains a degree of wealth enabling movement out of the ghetto. In this light, black ghettos should be seen as regions of arrival and departure tied to the economic success of the migrant.

The ultimate value of the citizenship model is that it places the migrant at the center of the African American Diaspora. Earlier paradigms do so either implicitly or not at all. Geographic patterns of the black migration experience will emerge in terms of the decisions made by individuals responding to external forces and national ideals as they are integrated into their own lives and culture.

Art and Literature of the Great Black Migration

The Great Black Migration was such an important event in the African American community that almost no corner of that culture's life was unaffected, and some of the most powerful expressions of the event are found in black art and culture. Writers, painters, musicians, and poets all produced expressions of what the migration meant to them and their people. Such art and literature can be a vehicle for examining how blacks in America have imagined the effects of relocation on perceptions of home and regional identity. It may help explain why people would turn again and again to their place of origin—even though that place of origin is not always a locale of peace and acceptance for people in the racial minority.

Blues musicians are a particularly incisive example. Blues is an African American art form based in the oral tradition. Many scholars have pointed out that blacks have used its music and lyrics to comment on their own experiences and those of their community. As such, the entirety of the blues pantheon can stand as a historical

document for the Great Black Migration. In fact, Clyde Woods refers to the vernacular black worldview as a “blues epistemology (Woods 1998).”

Blacks living in the South during the years of legal segregation and Jim Crow were subjected to a number of restrictions; chief among them was the restriction of movement. While there were no written laws that forbid blacks from traveling in the South, lone black men found in white neighborhoods, or on certain public roads, were often at the mercy of white law enforcement officers. A common practice was the imprisonment of black men for the ill-defined crime of vagrancy. After Reconstruction, blacks who did not sign labor contracts with white planters could be forced to work and to remain on a particular plantation or be sent to the state penitentiary at Parchman, Mississippi. Blues singer and guitarist Johnny Shines of Helena, Arkansas, tells stories about his first experiences traveling in the Mississippi Delta, a short ferry ride across the river. After having been imprisoned for vagrancy, and losing his guitar to the jailer, he vowed that if he should ever travel in the Delta again, he would ship his guitar ahead of him. As a result of the consistent restrictions that were placed on the free movement of blacks, many blues singers incorporated the element of movement and travel in their lyrics. Such musical protest fits the view that blues lyrics were an important form of oral expression and commentary on the system of white supremacy that existed in the region at that time.

Robert Johnson

Robert Johnson is one of the most important figures in blues history (Figure 2). A native of Copiah County, Mississippi, in the hills south of Jackson, he made his mark on the blues music, and eventually, American popular music, learning and playing in

the Delta in the 1930s. Johnson was not the first blues singer, but he did play a central role in bridging the gap between the more archaic and ethnically rooted blues of Charley Patton to the more modern, jazz influenced, sounds that captured the attention of generations of pop musicians in the years after Johnson's death. Robert Johnson recorded *Walking Blues* in 1936. The song was a Delta Blues standard, in that most of the leading musicians of the region performed a version of the song. *Walking Blues* reflect a deep restlessness and compulsion to travel, a spatial restlessness perhaps born out of geographic restrictions placed on blacks by existing power structures. Johnson's version of the song includes the verses:

I woke up this mornin', feelin' round for my shoes
 You know by that I got these old walkin' blues,
 Woke this mornin' feelin' round for my shoes
 But you know by that, I got these old walkin' blues

Lord I feel like blowin' my old lonesome horn
 Got up this mornin', my little Bernice was gone,
 Lord I feel like blowin' my lonesome horn
 Well I got up this mornin', whoa all I had was gone

Well, leave this mornin' if I have to, ride the blinds
 I feel mistreated, and I don't mind dyin'
 Leavin' this mornin', if I have to ride the blind
 Babe, I've been mistreated, baby and I don't mind dyin.' (Johnson 1936)

In *Me and the Devil Blues*, Johnson expresses a fatalistic sentiment as he contemplates his final resting-place. The piece refers to a Greyhound bus. Recording as he did in the 1930s, a reference to a bus line would have been topical, and perhaps novel, since most in his community had a long acquaintance with train travel. In fact, Highway 61 had yet to become a blues icon. Indeed, the following verse is carved

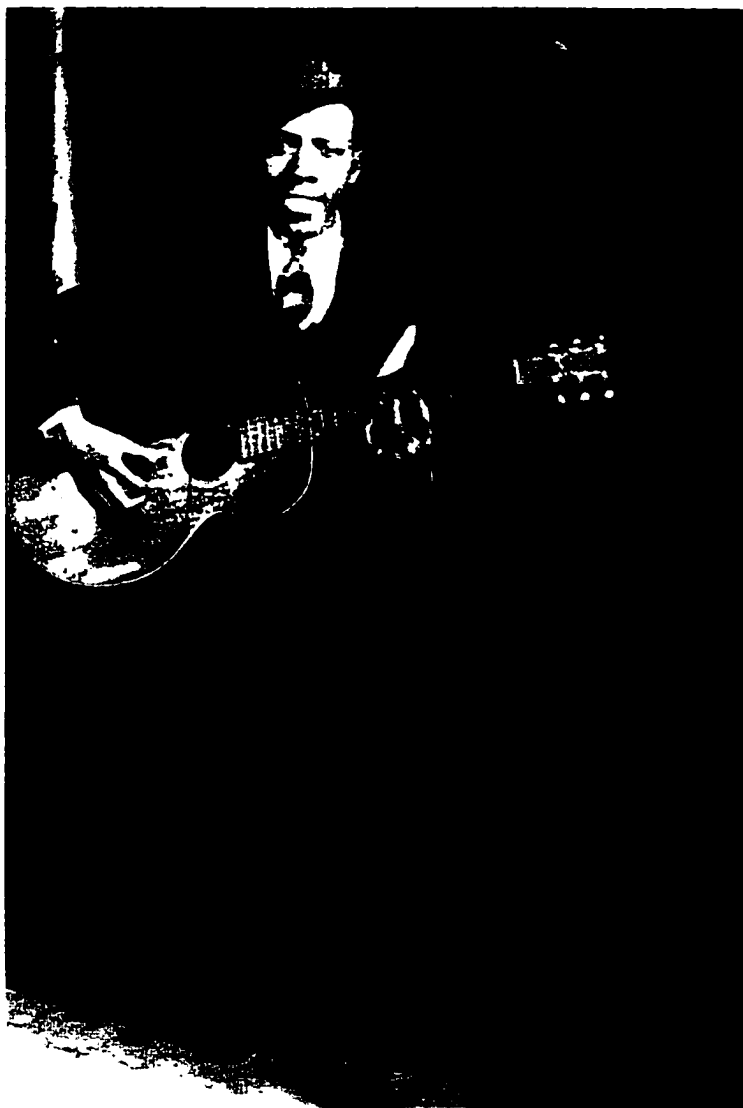


Figure 2. Robert Johnson. Photograph used by permission of Delta Haze Corporation.

in stone on a granite marker placed in the Mount Zion Baptist Church cemetery (some believe it is Johnson's grave; others disagree) near Morgan City, Mississippi, in the Mississippi Delta. Johnson sang:

You may bury my body down by the highway side,
 (spoken) Baby I don't care where you bury my body when I'm dead and gone,
 You may bury my body down by the highway side,
 So my old evil spirit can catch a Greyhound bus and ride. (Johnson 1936)

Robert Johnson made his most direct reference to the Great Black Migration in his song *Sweet Home Chicago*. The song provides a kind of mystery since no one is even sure that Johnson ever traveled to Chicago. In addition, the lyrics of the song suggest that Chicago is found in the state of California—an odd blues geography.

Oh, baby don't you want to go
 Oh, baby don't you want to go
 Back to the land of California, to my sweet home Chicago

Now, one and one is two, two and two is four
 I'm heavy loaded baby, I'm booked, I gotta go
 Cryin' baby, honey, don't you want to go
 Back to the land of California, to my sweet home Chicago. (Johnson 1936)

One reason that Johnson's music is so important to the study of the Great Black Migration is its temporal relation to the era in which he worked and recorded. Johnson came to prominence as a blues musician in the 1930s and made his seminal recordings in 1936 and 1937; he recorded one session in San Antonio, Texas, and another in Dallas. Southern agriculture, and as a result, the lives of black Southerners, were undergoing major change in the late 1930s due to federal agricultural policy. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 (discussed in greater detail in Chapter III) led directly to mass unemployment and homelessness for thousands of Southern blacks. Because of these economic changes, millions were making the move out of the South.

or to new, often urban, locations within the South. For all Southerners, the era was one of great change and uncertainty. For many, especially white planters, the changes brought wealth and hope; for others, the changes brought despair and rootlessness. Johnson captures this sense of stunned loss and anger in explicit and suggestive ways. In *Love in Vain*, Johnson mourns his lost love as she leaves on an outbound train. The song does not mention where his lover is going, but it is plausible that she is caught up in the Great Black Migration, bound for Chicago or Detroit. The song is one of Johnson's most poetic and powerful compositions. The simple three-verse work touches the humanity of the Great Black Migration from the point of view of one left behind.

I followed her to the station with a suitcase in my hand
 And I followed her to the station with a suitcase in my hand
 Well it's hard to tell it's hard to tell, when all your love's in vain
 All my love's in vain

When the train rolled up to the station, I looked her in the eye
 When the train rolled up to the station, and I looked her in the eye
 Well I was lonesome I felt so lonesome, and I could not help but cry
 All my love's in vain

When the train it left the station, 't was two lights on behind
 When the train it left the station, 't was two lights on behind
 Well the blue light was my blues and the red light was my mind
 All my love's in vain. (Johnson 1936)

Bluesmen were some of the boldest African Americans of their era. Though placing themselves at great risk, they traveled widely, and they expressed what was important to them and their community in an explicit and public way. They became, effectively, spokesmen for the community and reflected for their people those things that many were afraid, or did not have the venue, to express on their own. William

Barlow notes that bluesmen were among the vanguard of the Great Migration (Barlow 1989). Rock and roll producer and promoter (some say its inventor) Sam Phillips's career echoes Barlow's point. For years, Philips had recorded blues artists at his fledgling Memphis Recording Service on Union Avenue; a business that later became the famed Sun Studios. He recorded many of the greatest blues musicians of his day. Howling Wolf, Frank Frost, and Robert Nighthawk were among his early recording artists. Time and again, however, these black performers would leave town, bound for St. Louis or Chicago. As he became increasingly frustrated with his loss of talent to migration, he decided to give up on his plan of recording black artists, and began to concentrate on white talent in the region. Elvis Presley's Sun Studios recording career is an example of his shift in business plan caused by black migration (Palmer 1981).

August Wilson

Many African American writers have used the Great Black Migration as material for their commentary on the black American experience. Two-time Pulitzer Prize winning playwright August Wilson has written several plays in a ten-cycle series intended to portray the black migration experience, decade by decade, in its historical totality. Wilson's *Jitney*, a play set in the 1970s, currently is in production off-Broadway, the first of his plays not to make to Broadway. The installment for the 1980s begins production in April of 2001.

Wilson argues that the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural south was a cultural and practical mistake. He points out that Africans in America forged a unique culture out of severe hardship, and they, in effect, maintained their African agrarian culture in a North America. Wilson's controversial ideas come out of

the long American tradition of black cultural nationalism that came to fruition in the 1960s. In a 1990 interview published in the *New York Times*, Wilson contends,

We were land-based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa, and we spent 200 years developing our culture as black Americans. And then we left the South. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized North. And it was a transplant that did not take. (Shannon 1997, 659)

August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize winning play, *The Piano Lesson*, dramatizes his argument by drawing the audience into one family's story of migration and their attempts to make sense of the past, present, and future in light of their geographic odyssey. In that play, Boy Willie and a friend travel from the Delta to Pittsburgh to visit Bernice, his sister, and Doaker, his uncle, with hopes of raising enough money to buy land in Sunflower County, Mississippi. It is worth noting that Wilson uses a Delta county even though he never lived in the Mississippi Delta, nor does he have family roots there. Perhaps this is another case where the Delta stands as the ideal for the rural black Southern experience in popular culture. Bernice has the old family piano, and it is Boy Willie's intention to sell it for cash, something Bernice vows she will never allow. The piano was once the property of the Sutters, a family of planters who once owned Boy Willie and Bernice's ancestors. Wilson uses the piano as a symbol for identity and meaning in the black American experience (Wilson 1987).

The white planter bought the piano as a gift for his wife and since he did not have the money, he traded slaves as the purchase price. Mr. Sutter traded Boy Willie and Bernice's Great great-grandmother and her son (Boy Willie and Bernice's grandfather), for the piano. Mr. Sutter kept their Great grandfather, who was a talented woodworker, thereby splitting up the family. Soon, the wife of the planter came to

regret the trade and longed for her former slaves and the services they provided, but the transaction could not be reversed. To alleviate her sadness, Mr. Sutter commanded Boy Willie Sr., Boy Willie's and Bernice's great-grandfather, to carve several images of the lost slaves into the wood of the piano. The images included depictions of the woodcarver's lost wife and child, as well as scenes from important events in their lives. In one image, Boy Willie's great grandfather carved an illustration of his wife and son being driven away by their new masters. Through the woodwork, the piano becomes an artifact of African American culture, a totem of life and family. Understanding its deep family importance, Bernice resists Boy Willie's plans to sell the piano (Wilson 1987).

For Boy Willie, the family legacy contained in the piano is less important than the possibility of owning land. He argues that their father would have agreed with him that land was far more important than any piano, even one of such cultural-historical significance. As Boy Willie remarks, "Land is the one thing that they aren't making anymore of." The dilemma that Wilson presents in his play speaks to several themes in the African American experience. He implies that blacks in the American South created meaning out of degradation. The piano was bought with human life, yet one victim of this indignity created an object of beauty and cultural identity out of the same piece: beauty from horror, spiritual life from spiritual death. He understands that this was an event based in hardship and cruelty—a piano bought with human life—while at the same time he concedes that it led to the creation of something beautiful and meaningful. African Americans who love and cherish the rural South reflect Wilson's message in that they too care for a flawed place, a society that has not always respected them in return.

Richard Wright

Novelist and essayist Richard Wright's *Native Son* expresses much of the same sentiments found in Wilson's work. In *Native Son* there is a sense that blacks cannot find a home in America, that their world is one constructed for the purposes of white men. The anti-hero protagonist in *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, is a refugee from rural Mississippi. His experience in the urban North reflects Wilson's view that the urban life is ill suited for African Americans. In the opening scene of the novel, Bigger kills a rat in the crowded tenement that he shares with his mother and siblings. Reading the novel with an understanding of the hopes and dreams that attended the Great Black Migration, one is saddened to witness a migration that has failed in its aims for a better life. Later the same day, Bigger murders a wealthy white girl—by accident—and his life spirals into chaos. Richard Wright scholar, Edward Margolies, points out that Bigger's day begins and ends in death. As Bigger Thomas falls deep into trouble, despair, and violence, the reader understands that the city is not a place that is kind to black migrants.

As a socialist interested in economic justice, Wright intended his novel to be a kind of wakeup call to white America concerning the condition of the black underclass living in America's ghettos. In fact, he begins the novel with the ringing of an alarm clock—no subtle metaphor there (Margolies 1969). Shadowing Bigger Thomas in the novel is the land left behind, the rural South, a land of racial injustice. Throughout the novel is the notion that Bigger is wasting his time in the white man's city. One can imagine Bigger having the idea that Chicago had no more purpose for him than did rural Mississippi. Indeed, Wright's stormy relationship with the United States and his

affiliation with the Communist Party is a reaction to what he believes to be the unfair treatment of African Americans, first in the rural South, and later the rest of America, at the hands of ruling white elites. There is an echo of DuBois's concern that the throngs of rural Southern blacks who fled to Northern cities were not prepared for the life they found. Wright's message is, perhaps, more hopeless in that he does not seem to believe that any American place would accept African Americans. In fact, Wright's ultimate expatriation in Europe is evidence of this interpretation.

Artistically, Wright's narrative form is similar to August Wilson's in his use of black vernacular speech patterns, a style born out of the Harlem Renaissance and writers like Langston Hughes. Wright finds beauty in the black speech patterns of his Mississippi youth and its urban forms living and changing in the black American Diaspora.

Jacob Lawrence

Jacob Lawrence is a major figure in American art whose primary project was painting the African American experience. Lawrence, an African American, came out of the dynamic art scene of Harlem in the 1930s. He gained his first experience as an artist while attending a community arts class at the local YMCA. The young artist soon found that his neighborhood and community provided the visual and narrative material to express through painting what he felt he needed to say. In a 1980s interview Lawrence points out that as a boy of fourteen or fifteen he did not have the ability to write or recount the images in his imagination, but he could paint them (Babcock 1993).

Lawrence, who died in the summer of 2000, was a narrative painter, who often produced works in series that were based on unified themes (Stabile 1998). For

example, one series was based on the life of Harriet Tubman, while another honored the life and work of black Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture. Perhaps his most well known work was titled *The Migration Series*. The series, completed in 1941, included sixty panels and was accompanied by descriptive narrative. One painting in the series bore a caption that read:

The Negroes were given free passage on the railroads which was paid back by Northern industry. It was an agreement that the people brought North on the railroads were to pay back their passage after they had received jobs. (Stabile 1998, 28)

Jacob Lawrence was not a migrant himself, but his parents were. He drew much of his narrative description from interviews, discussions, books, and other secondary documents. Lawrence worked within a highly trained modernist artistic tradition, rather than in a nativist, or folk, tradition. While taking classes at his Harlem area YMCA, he was identified as a talented artist and was tutored by a long line of professional painters. The fact that he was not a migrant himself does not necessarily take away from his validity as a chronicler of the African American migration experience. He viewed himself more as a teacher than an artist painting personal testimonies. In fact, in his 1940 grant application, in which he sought funding to begin his work on *The Migration Series* (Figures 3 and 4), he wrote:

The significance of a project such as this rests, I think, on its educational value. It is important as a part of the evolution of America, since this migration has affected the whole of America mentally, economically and socially. Since it has had this effect, I feel that my project would lay before the Negroes themselves a little of what part they have played in the history of the United States. In addition, the whole of America might learn some of the history of this particular minority group, of which they know very little. (Stabile 1998, 27)



Figure 3. "They Were Very Poor" Panel number 10, *Migration Series*. Used by permission of the Jacob Lawrence Project.

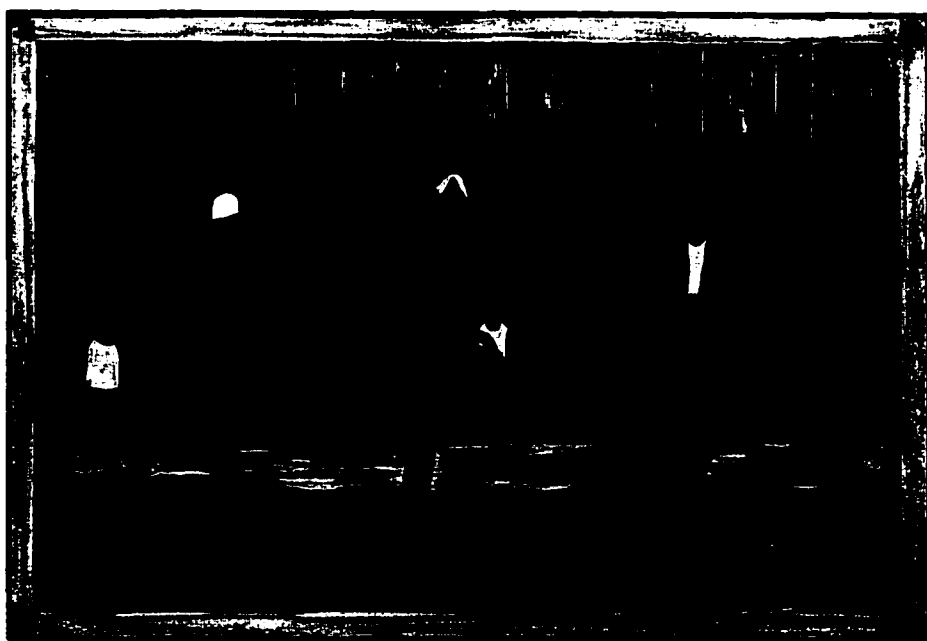


Figure 4. "And the Migrants Kept Coming" Panel number 60, *Migration Series*. Used by permission of the Jacob Lawrence Project.

Working in a type of cubist form, Lawrence's works convey bold themes with bold colors and sharp angles that often seem to bend and move in an affected Afro-rhythm. In an interview in the 1980s Lawrence comments that his work is like a philosophy. He suggests that his philosophy is not one that expresses ideas through words or symbols, but through painting.

Maintaining Family Ties Between Migrants and Their Southern Homeplaces

The proceeding subsection deals with images of black migration in art and literature. This section looks at the ways that this experience is lived in the day-to-day lives of African Americans. One of the constants concerning black life in America is that black extended families, perhaps more so than most white families with Southern roots, have retained a functioning family system across the miles and years, even as members of those families have moved out of the region (Stack 1974). The following account reveals this connection between Southern and Northern families through the death of a Northern family member.

Rosetta Patton Brown lives in Duncan, Mississippi. Rosetta, or "Miss Rosetta," as members of the community refer to her, is the eighty three year old daughter of pioneer blues musician Charley Patton. I found the legendary blues musician's daughter by asking the postmistress if she knew of a woman in the area named Rosetta. "Of course," she said, and gave me directions to her small white frame house. Rosetta's father was one of the originators of the Mississippi Delta Blues style as it came to fruition in the early 1900s. Ethnomusicologists point out that the Delta Blues art form is a folk style that usually consisted of an acoustic guitar (often fretted with a severed bottleneck) and a single vocal. Lyrics most often were regionally inspired and topical,

while the guitar accompaniment adhered to an exceedingly complex rhythmic scheme that many argue was African in origin. Patton had an enormous impact on such blues singers as Son House, Robert Johnson, Howling Wolf, and Willie Brown, a group of musicians that constitutes the taproot of rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and indeed, much of American popular music.

Rosetta receives visitors from as far away as Japan, and occasionally, she receives a donation or royalty check in the mail. She has but few memories of her father, and did not even own any of his recordings until a visiting student from Virginia gave her a copy. Mostly she entertains her young guests with tales of life as a rural Mississippian and of her family. Rosetta talks often about her sister who moved to Chicago in the 1930s. They kept in touch over the years, and when the sister died, Rosetta knew that she must travel to Chicago to retrieve her body. It is common for families to bury their Delta-born kin in their old homeplace, although they might have lived outside the region for decades. For Rosetta, such a trip was fraught with anxiety and fear, since she claims to detest, and be afraid of, large cities. She recalls her trip to Chicago by claiming, “I remember saying to myself, ‘If I ever get back home to Duncan, I ain’t never coming back here!’” With that she breaks into a brilliant smile that broadens her Afro-Native American features into a bold expression of gaiety. The fact that everyone understood that the body must come back home to the Delta for burial testifies to the importance that the place holds for African Americans whose lives are bound to the region.

Historian Leon Litwack places this type of spatial and generational connection into context by pointing to the difficult history experienced by blacks in America. He

argues that because blacks in America have had to deal with slavery, institutional racism, and severe poverty, they have turned to the family unit as a means of survival. Using records from the Freedmens's Bureau, a federal agency set up after the Civil War to monitor and assist blacks in their shift to freedom, Litwack reports that many freed slaves put enormous energy into searching for and reuniting their families that had been separated due to the slave trade. In addition, his reading of the Bureau's reports suggests that blacks were likely to settle into stable family units, a fact that is counter to the popular myth that the post-Civil War black family was a weak institution. Finally, Litwack argues, the comfort of the black family served the purpose of economic stability, social dignity, and communal support (Litwack 1979).

One way that this pattern of family assistance arose in the Great Black Migration is through the process of chain migration. Chain migration occurs when one member of a family or community (sometimes a small group of migrants) makes the initial move to the destination location. Once there, the migration pioneers set up a household and begin to look for employment. As they become established in the new location, they contact friends and family back home, and facilitate the migration of others to their newfound locale. In many cases, whole families came to work in the same businesses, as personnel agents for those firms trusted the judgment of existing employees and hired their relatives and friends. A well known story of the Great Black Migration holds that employers in Northern factories in the Midwest preferred to hire black workers from the state of Mississippi, understanding that social conditions in that state were so difficult that black workers from there were likely to be accustomed to hard labor, and perhaps, that they were inured to a strict type of supervision. Employers

also understood that black workers from Mississippi and other Southern states were likely to have family members back home who would come to depend on money earned on that job; employers knew that with the added responsibility of financially supporting relatives in the South, they would be likely to hold that job for as long as they could, thus reducing employment turnover (Grossman 1989).

The Tide Turns: Black Return Migration to the South

By the late 1960s, massive black migration out of the South had ended, and by the late 1970s, scholars began to observe that the Great Black Migration had reversed. Mainly due to in-migration, the North and West recorded annual net increases in its African American population during the first half of the twentieth century (Long and Hansen 1986). By the 1980s, however, these same regions began to record net out-migration of blacks. As shown in Table 2, the South had become a region experiencing positive net in-migration of African Americans (Robinson 1986). Between 1985 and 1990, about 175,000 blacks moved into the South each year from the Midwest, Northeast, and West. Post-1985 return migration reveals a dramatic increase over previous periods.

Table 2. Black Migration to the South From Selected Regions (In Thousands), 1965-1995

Years	Northeast	Midwest	West	Total	Net Change
1965-70	69	57	36	162	NA
1970-75	158	122	22	302	14
1975-80	189	126	102	418	195
1980-85	130	171	110	411	58
1985-90	NA	NA	NA	888	325
1990-95	NA	NA	NA	NA	369

During the Great Black Migration, the North and West represented places of racial and economic opportunity for blacks—whether true or not—and the rural South

represented economic stagnation and racial oppression. That the South is now a place of choice for black migrants is a stunning contrast to the historical legacy of Southern black out-migration. The three routes of migration established during the Great Black Migration are the same avenues being followed by black return migration (McHugh 1984). Most blacks in America trace their family history to the Southern United States, thus their movements are understandable in light of an observable flow through space. A recent study in black out-migration from Los Angeles County suggests that these return patterns continue to be important but are growing increasingly more complex in that the corridor model of return migration mentioned above is expanding to include other destinations (Roseman and Lee 1998). These new patterns are associated with black migration to the South's urban centers. For example, a move from San Francisco to Charlotte does not follow explicitly the corridor model, but is a type of black return migration to the South.

Return Migrants Defined

Problems in defining the black return migrant are geographic, temporal, and semantic. Many writers have commented on the general trend of return migration of blacks to the South. As observers look at this issue, they must first decide what they mean by the South. Black return migration to the Mississippi Delta is the central focus here, however, I must discuss the broader migration to the South to contrast migration to one corner of the whole. Geographers and historians have written reams trying to define the South geographically, and maybe they have engaged in fruitless labor since the question is unanswerable and perhaps uninteresting. The Census Bureau uses a sixteen state South that includes the border states of Texas, Oklahoma, Kentucky, West

Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware. Most recent scholarship of the African American Diaspora uses a ten state South consisting of Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, South Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas.

Two categories of return migrants are linked migrants and independent migrants. Linked migrants are those who return to a place in the South that holds some historic meaning or importance for them. The returnee may be someone who was born in the Southern region, moved away at some point, and is returning home. A second type of linked return migrant is someone who was not born in the South, but is connected to the region through familial relationships. It may be the case that their parents or grandparents were natives of the South, and through some process, they have come to live in their ancestral homeplace. I include also the African American who has a spouse who is linked to the South in some way, and that person (although the person may or may not have any known connections to the South) accompanies the linked migrant to live in the South. I consider this latter migrant a return migrant because they are moving into a region that has a deep historical meaning for their race since most blacks in America have a family history that is linked to the South. Even if the spouse or partner is not African American, they will be forced to deal with the South and its legacy of racial concerns.

Independent migrants are those African Americans moving into the South who have no known connection to the region. It may be likely that the migrant has Southern roots but is moving to a region in the South other than that which bears some family meaning for them. This type of black migrant is likely to move into the region to take a job, perhaps in one of the South's urban centers like Atlanta or Birmingham. In one

sense, this migrant must confront the South as a region that is imbued with a set of mores and history that place it at odds with black economic advancement and civil rights, and as such, stands as a symbol for white supremacy. The migrant, however, deals with this condition as an adjunct to their initial decision to move south. That migration decision came from a desire to take advantage of what the South has to offer them in terms of economic advantage or environmental amenities. These are Southern pull factors. Black return migrants to the impoverished and rural South are often pushed from the North or West by negative economic or social situations and are drawn to the homeplace of the rural South as a refuge. Their refuge is one that is to be taken in spite of its negative economic and social geography rather than independent migrants who embrace the dynamic South of skyscrapers and shady suburbs. These independent migrants present an experience that needs to be explored in an ethnographic way; this dissertation, however, is not that study. Rather, this dissertation deals with linked migrants.

A 1989 study in *The Geographical Review* found that linked return migration accounts for 45 percent of black migration into the South as a whole, while independent return migration accounted for the remaining 55 percent (Stack and Cromartie 1989). Roseman and Lee's study of African American out-migration from Los Angeles County observed similar statistics regarding linked and independent migrants. I argue later that both studies underestimate linked return migration as a percentage of total return black migration.

Carol Stack, an anthropologist at the University of California at Berkeley, and John Cromartie, a population researcher for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, define

the linked return migrant in a novel way that took the study of black return migration to a new level of understanding. They define a linked migrant as a migrant to the South residing in the household of a person whose birthplace is in the South. Such a “stayer” either did not participate in the Great Black Migration or is a previous returnee. They reason that many linked return migrants begin their new life in the South by living with family or friends for a period immediately following their return. This definition makes a distinction between the linked return migrant and the independent return migrant, who is moving into the South with no documented prior connection to the South. An intimate connection exists between the linked return migrant and the South. To make such distinctions, researchers studying black return migration often use data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Public Use Micro Data Sample (PUMS), a data set that lists such detailed demographic data as each member of the household with his or her state of residence five years earlier, and his or her state of birth.

Although Stack and Cromartie's definition may be more inclusive than earlier ones, it still misses other return migrants in several ways. First, non-native linked return migrants who establish their own homes instead of joining an existing household upon returning to the South are lost in the census data and by Stack and Cromartie. Second, someone ought to be considered a return migrant if they are non-native and return to a homeplace in which all family has died or moved away. Returning to a place (perhaps a plot of family-owned land), regardless of whether or not family members are living there, is, I argue, a return. Including these individuals in the return migration population group would push Stack and Cromartie's 45 percent (linked migration as a

percentage of total return black migration) to a higher figure, and a corresponding higher regional significance.

Forty five percent of linked black return migration is to rural Southern counties, many of which the Department of Agriculture terms "persistent poverty counties" (Stack and Cromartie 1989). Migration to such places is often ignored in accounts of black return migration. In the winter of 1998, William Frey of the U.S. Census Bureau released an insightful, and well-publicized, study on black return migration. His study, however, scarcely mentioned these rural places as migration destinations. His study concentrated on black migration to the economically vibrant urban areas of the South. Of this independent return migration, it is understandable that only sixteen percent is to persistent poverty counties (Stack and Cromartie 1989). Indeed, why would an economic migrant select the impoverished rural South as a migration destination? Linked black return migration to the Delta is a phenomenon of blacks moving to rejoin a place, a people, a position in a community. Linked return migration is not only a racial return to a place, as is independent return migration, but, with respect to the migrant, is a return migration in the personal sense.

Return Migration Literature

Only a generation has passed since the beginning of the return migration, and the progress of related literature has been rapid. Initially, during the middle 1970s, leading scholars in the field minimized the significance of black return migration, saying that newspapers were overplaying the issue. Instead, they argued, net population gains of blacks in the South had more to do with reduced out-migration of blacks to the North (Long and Hansen 1975). Many studies since 1980, however, acknowledge that

blacks are moving into the South in far greater numbers than they are leaving.

Nevertheless, black out-migration from the South continues, but is exceeded by black in-migration.

Although the Great Black Migration has been the subject of many books, articles, and film documentaries, it still garners more attention than the current return migration. The reluctance by scholars to address return migration to the South might be attributed to assumptions made by academics that studied the earlier Great Black Migration. The assumption tended to be that black migrants had abandoned the South with no intention of coming back. Although migration patterns are changing, scholars are often conservative in reversing their thinking. Explaining why blacks would return to a place that for generations represented oppression and lack of opportunity is difficult (Stack 1996).

In the past twenty years, many observers of black return migration have expressed surprise that such a migration should occur. Why would African Americans return to a place that they and their ancestors had escaped? Why would they return, when for many, the escape was a victory over place-based oppression. The notion that Mississippi was a place to escape is expressed in the popular African American song *Down In Mississippi*.

I got nothing against Mississippi,
Also the home of my wife,
I feel just like a lucky man
Get away with my life.

(Traditional)

Scholars began writing about the reversal of the Great Black Migration as soon as data from the 1970 census became available. Over the decades, population

geographers and others came to realize that the return of blacks to the South was a pattern that was going to last for quite some time. Several themes developed in this study that, in totality, paints a picture of black Americans returning to the lands and cities of their ancestors. Some writers reported on their experience with census data that revealed the new migration while others conducted vast surveys in an attempt to discern any common themes in the return migration with an eye on how those patterns related to the previous migration. Others scoured the popular press or conducted their own fieldwork to find accounts of return migrants themselves. This latter research method is best represented in the emerging body of work. Since the return migration began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, these writers and observers have laid down a useful literature, in terms of statistical analysis, theoretical background, and more humanistic endeavors.

Geographer James Johnson has written about black return migration since the phenomenon emerged. He was one of the first to note that there were a limited number of return migration fields that were more or less related to the original out-migration streams that blacks who left the South had followed. His early study identifies East Texas, the Lower Mississippi River Valley (including the Mississippi Delta), and the coastal plains of Carolina and Georgia. His work—with fellow geographer Stanley Brunn—argued that most black return migration was from urban centers outside the South to urban centers inside the South. Their work, which was published in 1980, was prescient in that they identified the fact that black return migrants fell into two broad classes: those moving independently into the South, without the aid and comfort of kinship and friends in their destinations, and those who were actual return migrants.

who were joining (or rejoining) a homeplace. This early piece draws quotes and context from popular black culture sources like *Ebony* magazine (Johnson and Brunn 1980).

As passing decades yielded additional census data, Johnson followed his initial piece with others. A 1990 article delves below the regional level to analyze population figures from cities, determining net growth through migration. Table 3 is a selection of cities from his work that shows the net population changes due to out-migration of blacks in the years from 1965 to 1970, and 1975 to 1980.

Table 3. Net African American Migration for selected SMSAs, 1965-70 and 1975-80

MSA	1965-70	1975-80
Chicago, IL	-2,101	-42,117
Cleveland, OH	5,519	-12,682
Detroit, MI	33,485	-4,285
New York, NY-NJ	-13,225	-133,721
Philadelphia, PA-NJ	11,119	-16,851
Pittsburgh, PA	-3,537	-2,946

With the exception of Pittsburgh, the table shows a fundamental change in migration pattern for the cities represented. By 1975, it is evident that thousands of African Americans were giving up on these traditional centers of black economic hope and optimism (Johnson 1990).

Writing on the eve of the 1990 census, Johnson considers structural changes in social and economic conditions, both inside and outside the South, to assign some motive for black return migration. He looks at rising housing costs in urban areas outside the South as a push factor in the move back South for blacks, while he notes the pleasing environmental qualities of the South as pull factors. In contrast to the era covered by his earlier work, he notes that the majority of black migrants into the South

are returnees. Work such as Johnson's falls into a category of migration research that is steeped in the quantitative/positivist tradition. Such work serves as a foundation for any understanding of this kind of study (Johnson 1990).

An early study by Long and Hansen (1977) focused on a comparison of the emerging return migration to the Great Black Migration. Their interest lay in ascertaining the educational level of blacks who were returning to the South. They found that return migrants, like the original Southern out migrants, were, on average, better educated than those who did not move. Their research agenda grew out of an impression, in the first years of the return migration, that these returnees were probably the least educated of the larger group who had left the South between 1910 and 1970. This hypothesis grew out of a notion that the people who would return to their Southern homes were those migrants who had failed to achieve success in their new lives in the North. Failure, to those who ascribed to this hypothesis, would have been more likely among those migrants who were least educated. Long and Hansen found that this hypothesis was incorrect; return migrants were better educated.

Kevin McHugh's work in black return migration develops the life history approach model of migration, while at the same time drawing upon statistical methods. In one of his early pieces, McHugh explores the notion of location specific capital in an attempt to understand the migration decisions of black migrants. He argues that the more an individual has invested emotionally and temporally in a particular place, the greater the tendency to keep that person in place. His work drew from a large sample of surveys that questioned a broad array of migration factors. He, like other geographers looking into black migration, outlined the three channels associated with the twentieth

century African American Diaspora: the Eastern Seaboard route, the Mississippi Valley route, and the Southwest Desert route. McHugh was influenced by the ethnographic work being done by anthropologist Carol Stack among black return migrants in the Carolinas. McHugh's ethnography began, however, after he ceased looking into black return migration; his ethnographic work involved seasonal migration of elderly persons to the Desert Southwest (McHugh 1996).

This work represents a growing interest among geographers and others in the social sciences with qualitative methods and humanistic principles. Carol Stack's *Call to Home* addresses black return migration to the South through ethnography. While scholars in various disciplines have addressed the topic of black return migration since the phenomenon's beginning, few have documented the words of actual migrants. Stack's work balances the richness and depth of ethnography with objective geographical and historical background (Stack 1996).

At the center of *Call to Home* is Pearl, the matriarch of a large family that stretches from the Carolinas through several urban centers of the Middle Atlantic States and Northeast. Stack shows a pattern of family members relying on other family members for housing in her study of return migration to the South Atlantic Coast region. Her examples of shared child rearing are central in this pattern of communal living as she relates the experiences of Southern grandparents caring for their Northern-born grandchildren. She notes that such living arrangements are common and cyclical, as children may live in the South with family members for an extended period, and later return to their parent's homes in the North. Some children join their parents when they make the return migration to the South. These living arrangements serve to instill an

experience of Southern culture in the children involved. Should these children return to live in the North, they will have gained knowledge about the South that may make a future return migration more likely. Regarding a life spent raising her grandchildren, Pearl explains:

I raised my daughter Shirley's two children--they were the first grandchildren I took in. She couldn't find a babysitter in New York, and Samuel said, "Well then, just bring the babies home." And now Shirley is raising her cousin's child, and her own two are still in my house, nearly grown. I raised two of Verlene's children, and also Sammy, Eula's first child, and then Edward, I had him since he was two. The children I keep don't seem to be thinking of their parents like they ought to--they're thinking of me. I'm not complaining, but it's not how it ought to be. (Stack 1996, 104)

Stories like this are central to an understanding of black return migration in that they show one way that young residents of the North become intimately connected to Southern place and culture (Stack 1996).

One of Stack's informants left a well-paying clerical job in the Northeast to return to her family in coastal Carolina. The only work that she could find back home involved a lengthy commute to a chicken processing plant. The repetitive motions required of her on the job caused her to develop an excruciating case of carpal tunnel syndrome. Such cases of underemployment are common among return migrants and show that return migration is not an economic migration. Movers know that the economy of the South lags behind the national average, especially the rural South. The rural region that Stack studied lags behind the Southern average. Obviously, it is not economic potential that drives the migration; it is something deeper. It is the desire to come home (Stack 1996).

Other stories in *Call to Home* involve community and political action pursued by returnees. Stack writes of a sentiment within the returnee community that judges their success outside the region as license to become leaders in their homeplaces. In one example of community activism, a group of women, who are all return migrants,

recognize the material poverty of rural Carolina. They establish a volunteer relief agency called Holding Hands whose purpose is to supplement the physical needs of the poor in the region. The members of the group each contribute some of their own money and solicit donations throughout their counties. Stack points out that such community action is characteristic of many return migrants. She implies that African Americans who have proven themselves outside the South are not content to acquiesce to the regional economic and political status quo. In a second example of community action among return migrants, Stack tells the story of Vernon Bradley. Mr. Bradley objects to the situation wherein whites control the county school board while these same board member's children attend private academies. He is outraged at the condition of public schools and reasons that one problem is that school board leaders have little incentive to improve the county's public education since their children are not in the system. Eventually Mr. Bradley becomes the county's first African American school board member. Bradley's story is another example of the action and accomplishment of return migrants in the Southern homeplace. Stack concludes that the significance of black return migration lies in the degree to which returnees affect the socio-political identity of the South (Stack 1996).

Population demographer William Frey completed a study of black return migration in 1998 that received an enormous amount of attention in the popular press. He points out in the study that black migration to the South increased dramatically in the 1990s. As scores of studies had predicted in previous decades, Frey believes that black return migration to the South is a pattern that is likely to continue well into the twenty first century. Few, however, had predicted that the return migration would accelerate to the degree that Frey observed. In the years between 1990 and 1996, the American West became the final of the three migration channels to record net losses of African Americans due to migration. Contrary to what other observers had noticed in previous decades, Frey noted also that the reverse migration included all age levels and

all education levels. For example, one fifth of black in-migrants into the South were college graduates and only seven percent were sixty-five years or older (Frey 1998).

Among his other findings was the fact that seventy seven percent of the Southern black population lived in a metropolitan area, and of that percentage, forty three percent lived in the suburbs. Of the black return migrants, eighty-six percent lived in metro areas, with fifty-nine percent of that number living in suburban places. In Southern cities of more than one million people, the black population grew by an average of slightly more than twelve percent. Smaller metro areas had an almost identical increase in their black populations. Rural regions of the South saw an increase in its black population of nearly ten percent, some of which is attributable to black return migration.

A recent study of the topic appeared in *Sociological Spectrum* that looks at black return migration through a lens of feminist theory. The authors begin with the observation that, although the Great Black Migration and the Great Return Migration have been well-documented (especially the former), little work has been done from the point of view of women. The authors, all of whom are men, argue that studies in black migration, whether consciously or not, take the point of view of men. Using PUMS data, the authors pay close attention to households that are headed by females and households that are not comprised of the traditional nuclear family. They also point out that there are often cases among black return migrants in which the household is comprised of non-family members. Although the article explores alternative theoretical underpinnings, it is an exercise rooted in statistics and positivist discourse (Adelman, Morett, and Tolnay 2000).

In their 1997 article, Roseman and Lee put the concepts of linked and independent return migration to incisive use. Using 1990 PUMS data they found that in the years between 1985 and 1990, forty-five percent of black migration into the South was independent and that thirty-eight percent was linked. The remaining seventeen

percent was to group quarters, such as military barracks and college dormitories. This latter residential setting is not usually considered to be a form of linked return migration, but there are many cases in which a young person may choose to migrate to a familial homeplace, and as an adjunct to that decision, decide to attend a local college and perhaps live in a dormitory. In such a setting that student will still be able to maintain close contacts with family in the area and should be considered a return migrant, although the authors do not.

One of the more important observations that Roseman and Lee make is related to the demographic qualities of linked migration. Traditionally, geographers and others have sought to place black return migration in concert with classical migration theory, like Ravenstein's *Laws of Migration*. What Roseman and Lee have found, however, is that linked return migrants bore little resemblance to those classic models. Their study found, for example, that there was no significant relationship between linked migration and occupational experience, labor market conditions, social services support systems at the destination, or the education level of the migrant. Linked migration seems to respond to factors that are more difficult to quantify, such as home, place attachment, and familial responsibilities (Roseman and Lee 1998). Such is the case with most black return migration to the Mississippi Delta.

CHAPTER 3

RETURNING TO SOMETHING FAMILIAR: SENSE OF PLACE IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

Regionalism lost its academic luster in the latter half of the twentieth century. With the mantra of globalism, critics of regionalism promote the inevitability of a placeless world of technology and increasing homogeneity. The Mississippi Delta is one region, however, that refutes those who argue that places are irrelevant today. The Delta is a definable region by most elements of the term that one might imagine (Figure 5). Physically, the region is immediately distinctive in its flatness and rich alluvial soil. Economically, the Delta is dominated by an agricultural system that is unified in its organizational practices and political control. The cultural environment of the Delta is as uniquely recognizable and internationally recognized as its level land. African American culture in the Delta is responsible for an amazingly intense form of blues, and some of the finest remnants of traditional black sacred music continue to thrive in the region. Historically, whites in the Delta helped to shape a mythic notion, and tangible way of living, that became synonymous with the proper way for the Southern landed class to live. Literature by William Alexander Percy, and his adopted nephew Walker, is informed and influenced by the lives of those in this white ruling class. As a term, “The Mississippi Delta” evokes images and histories for those interested in American culture the world over.

Sensitivity to region and place are paramount for those African Americans who are returning to live in the region. As mentioned earlier, most writing on black return

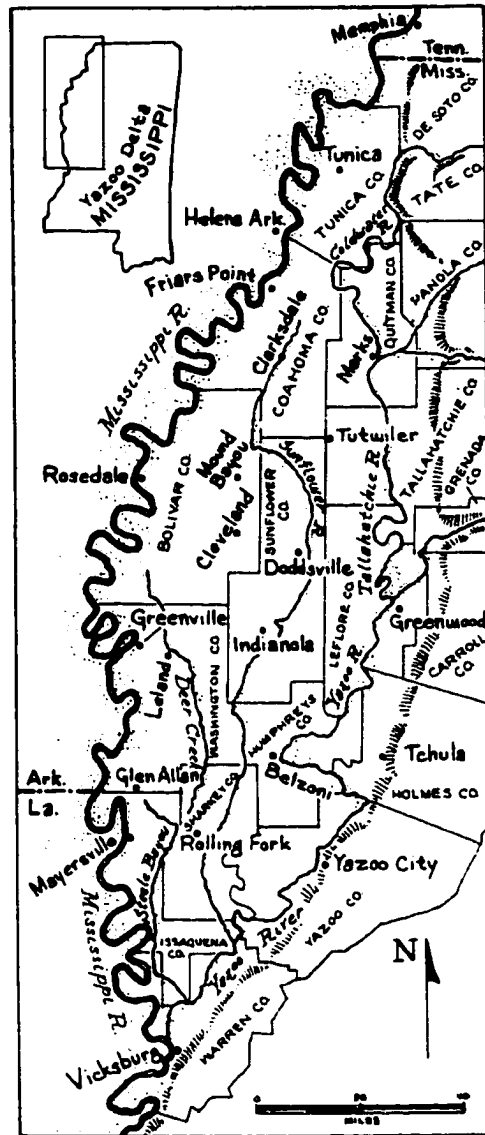


Figure 5. The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. The floodplain of the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers extends from the Mississippi River on the west, to a line of loess bluffs on the east. Reprinted, by permission, from John Willis, *Forgotten Time* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), xvi.

migration to the South looks at people relocating to urban settings, primarily as a result of economic forces and secondarily as a result of changing social forces. In this line of thinking, place and the sense of place is important only insofar as it affects individual economic potential. For the economic migrant to an urban Southern place there are few aspects of unified region that can be observed. Cities like Atlanta and Nashville are certainly Southern in the geographic sense, but are increasingly drawn into a wider economic and social world due to the powerfully integrative forces of communications and transportation technology present there.

The Delta has not escaped the forces of techno-spatial integration yet remains a place removed from the rest of the South. There are at least three Internet service providers and several cable television companies in the region while many in non-urban Delta locations purchase satellite television services. Tony Dunbar makes the case in his 1991 book *Delta Time* that cable television has reduced the isolation of the Delta. He draws an example from the black community when he recounts how state politicians serving the Delta in the Mississippi legislature would often be received mistakenly as federal officials. Dunbar notes that many Deltans would often ask these local officials "How are things up in Washington (Dunbar 1990)?" Today, Deltans can watch debates on the floor of the United States Congress through C-SPAN.

Regardless of the advances in communication technology, the Delta remains a place that is, if not isolated, certainly off the main path, or out of the main stream of American life. Not a single interstate highway traverses the Delta, although Interstate Sixty-Nine, which will connect Mexico and the United States Mid West, is in the final planning stages. Those living in the central Delta are at least two hours from an airport

that has regular jet flights. The Mississippi River serves as an effective barrier to westward transportation in the region since there are only two bridge crossings in nearly two hundred miles along the Delta's western border. Even with the recent growth of Internet services in the Delta there are no high-speed cables in the region, a problem for much of rural America. Many Delta residents still believe that it is better to seek high order medical care in either Jackson or Memphis. In fact, if one needs certain services, such as neurology or delicate pediatric surgery, one cannot find it in the Delta. Amtrak provides service at the margin of the Delta, in Greenwood, while the aging Illinois Central track is being torn up to make way for walking trails funded by federal money.

Ultimately, return migration to the Mississippi Delta is a turn away from the social and economic core of the United States in favor of insularity and relative isolation. The migrant's skills of cultural integration and understanding are tested in that Delta culture tends to distrust outside influences and is hesitant to embrace ideas and values that seem ingrained in more progressive areas of the country (Powdermaker 1939). This chapter is a snapshot of one such place in the South.

Physical Geography of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta

The Mississippi Delta is not a delta in the strict sense of the term. In the language of physical geography and geology, a delta is a triangle shaped area of alluvial land at the mouth of a large stream. The American region that is known popularly as the Mississippi Delta refers to the floodplain of the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers in northwest Mississippi (Figure 6). This vast expanse of alluvial lowland is bound on the west by the Mississippi River, and on the east by a line of loess bluffs. These bluffs are



Figure 6. Mississippi Delta Landscape. Photograph made on the banks of the Bogue Phalia River.

the remains of wind-blown silt that accumulated on the floodplain's eastern margin in the Pleistocene period, when westerly winds drove this material from the lands surrounding the then-dominant plains of braided streams—streams pouring from beneath Northern glaciers that later organized to become what we today identify as the Mississippi River (Cox 1998). These bluffs stand directly above the river on the north, at a site now occupied by Memphis, and on the south, at the site where Vicksburg was established. From these two promontories, the bluffs run in a gentle arc, southeast from Memphis—running steadily farther from the river, until they reach their greatest distance from the river at about seventy-five miles. The bluffs meet the river once more a little more than two hundred miles south of present day Memphis. The vast floodplain that is exposed between the river and the bluffs covers an area of 7,110 square miles, nearly identical to the Central American country of El Salvador. The region's soil is an accumulation of thousands of years of overflows by the great river and its tributaries, resulting in what many consider to be some of the world's most fertile and easily workable soils (Brandfon 1967).

No one knows why the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is called a delta when it is about two hundred miles from the river's actual delta at the Gulf of Mexico. Likely it is called a delta because it, too, is land that has been built over the centuries by flood deposits and because it resembled a river delta, with its swamps and poor drainage, when the first settlers came into the region.

Recent findings in physical geography argue that the lower Mississippi River Delta formed through a combination of tectonic, glacial, and fluvial processes. Geologic evidence suggests that around six hundred million years ago a rift valley

began to form in what is now the Mississippi River Valley. Rift valleys are formed by a tearing action that separates continents into pieces; the Rift Valley of Africa is an example of such a feature. For reasons that are not understood by geologists, the rift valley in the interior of North America stopped separating, leaving the region that would become the Mississippi Valley, a zone of weakened crust. Evidence of tectonic activity in the region includes the New Madrid, Missouri, earthquakes of 1811 and 1812, the worst on record for the United States (Cox 1998).

Mountain building and volcanic activity also played a role in the formation of the Delta. Two hundred million years ago the Appalachian Mountains were an unbroken chain stretching from the eastern highlands, west to what is now called the Ozark and Ouachita Mountains. New theories consider how the Delta region could have formed between these related regions; rock types and ages are identical in both ranges. Geologists hypothesize that North America has moved over a mantle plume, or hot spot over the last 180 million years. A mantle plume is a column of molten rock that rises from the earth's interior from a fixed position in relation to the poles. The New Madrid region, which was tectonically weakened in relation to the surrounding mountains, was lifted up as it moved over the hot spot. As this occurred, a higher mountain region formed that was subjected to the forces of erosion greater than that experienced by surrounding mountains. After the region moved off of the mantle plume the land reverted to its former level, which was lower in elevation due to its increased erosion. Thus, a deep valley appeared between the eastern and interior ranges (Cox 1998).

During the Pleistocene epoch, massive glaciers moved as far south as the current position of the Ohio and Missouri rivers. Melting ice beneath the glaciers formed great rivers that rushed down the newly created valley forming the Mississippi river. Around fifteen thousand years ago, glaciers melted causing the oceans to rise and thereby flood the lower portion of the Mississippi valley forming what geologists have coined the Mississippi Embayment. At that time, the Mississippi delta (the landform, not the place name) was located near what is now Cairo, Illinois. As the process of flooding and deposition continued over the centuries, land continued to build to the south. The lower Mississippi River Valley, including the Mississippi Delta, built slowly, as alluvium accumulated from centuries of flooding. The process continued until land built to its present location (Cox 102).

Historical Geography of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta

Little is known about the Native Americans who lived in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. The remains of their ceremonial mounds are a significant part of the cultural landscape, but anthropologists continue to wonder about the lives of those who built them. What scholars have written suggests that the native people of the Delta were a part of what is called the Southeastern Culture Area. These people lived in large settlements and sustained themselves through a combination of agriculture and hunting and gathering. Their culture consisted of a complex religious and political scheme, and reached its peak near the time of European contact. The Winterville Mound complex in Washington County is the best example of what these ancient people built in the Delta.

The Winterville Mounds were built during the Mississippian period, between A.D. 1200 and 1350. The complex is one of the largest and best preserved of the entire

Southeast Culture Area. At one time there was an array of twenty-three mounds, but as is the case throughout the region, several were plowed under to make way for straight rows of cotton, and others were leveled as a result of intensive grazing. Today, nineteen mounds remain on the site. At the center of the complex, standing fifty-five feet above the surrounding landscape, sits the largest mound. Facing the main mound is a forty-three acre plaza that probably served as an area for ceremonial functions and sacred sporting events (Hudson 1976). There is little evidence of village remains in the immediate area, and researchers believe that this lack of archeological history indicates that the site was mainly ceremonial, thus it did not support a large year-round resident population (Baca 1999).

Some argue that although the Delta's location along the Mississippi River (and its fertile soil) provided early cultures a good base for settlement, the danger of annual overflows kept the region a marginal area of the larger culture complex. Manuscripts from De Soto's expeditions quote an elderly Native American woman as saying that the great river tended to flood catastrophically about once every fourteen years. In the spring of 1543, while De Soto's party was in the region (perhaps the Northern Delta), such a flood occurred. Journals kept on the expedition report that the river began to rise in the middle of March, and did not crest until forty days later, and that all that was visible was the tops of trees. In anthropologist Charles Hudson's work on the topic, he points out that the reported forty day rise of the river may have been a reference to the Biblical Flood, but that there is no reason to doubt that De Soto's men witnessed the Mississippi claim its floodplain (Hudson 1997).

Aside from the obvious challenges that the Mississippi Delta presented to its native population, there also were some regional benefits. The cypress and gum forests that dominated the Delta were put to an assortment of uses. Such rot resistant wood was ideal for posts used in the construction of the traditional dwellings, and also provided ideal logs for dugout canoes. Another important resource came from the Delta's impenetrable cane breaks. Native Deltans used cane to fashion an assortment of handicrafts, large and small (Hudson 1976). Geographically, the Delta's proximity to the Mississippi River waterway implies that that these regional goods likely reached distant markets. Since there were many resources that the Delta did not offer, like flint stones, area traders and craftsmen may have bartered their region-specific wares from a position of power. Perhaps it is this resource-based quality that helped create a functional region capable of producing an urban center like the one at Winterville.

When Europeans arrived in North America, the Delta was a vast swampland covering more than 700,000 acres. Since the bed of the Mississippi River on the western border of the Delta descends a mere seven and one half inches per mile to the south, and somewhat less to the east as the land drops away from the natural levee of the Mississippi River, rivers run sluggishly in the region (Fenneman 1938). To casual observers, streams in the Delta may not appear to be flowing at all; perhaps this is why smaller streams in the region are not referred to as streams at all, but as "bayous." Today most of the Delta has been drained, but before Delta farmers went to work, much of the region was often covered in a few feet of still water. Cypress and tupelo gum claimed the poorly drained areas while pin oak and other hard woods stood on slightly higher ground. Cane breaks were often so thick as to make overland travel impossible. Will

Dockery, an early planter in the Delta's interior, describes the difficulty of traveling overland through forest and swamp from his plantation on the banks of the Sunflower River to the Mississippi River landing at Rosedale (Hemphill 1980). In a reflective piece he wrote late in life, he recalls:

To get to Rosedale, the county seat, one spent three days riding in the mud to make the round trip, or went to Greenville or Memphis and took the boat. I remember going to Rosedale in a tall two-wheeled cart, with a single horse, by the way of Merigold. My wheels got hot and stuck, and I had to pull the cart out in the cane, hang the harness in a tree, and lead the horse for several miles to Tony Arnold's and borrow a saddle to finish the trip. (Williams 1948, 172)

Early planters recognized immediately the potential value of the Delta's alluvial soil and were astounded that the soil went as deep as thirty feet. After the region was ceded by the Choctaw Nation to the federal government in 1830, the area began to be planted. Because of the difficulties in transportation in this dense forest, cotton planters tended to clear the land along the Mississippi River and the Delta's major streams, the Bogue Phalia, the Sunflower, the Yazoo, and the Tallahatchie. The challenge of the deep forest and the threat posed by wild animals and disease did not hinder early planters who had the money and labor to do the job; rather, it was the threat of flood from these streams. As the continent's greatest river, the Mississippi kept a possessive stranglehold on the Delta, prohibiting all but the bravest, perhaps most foolish, from risking a crop year in the Delta. James Cobb argues in his work, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, that this gambler's mentality still permeates planter/farmer culture in the Delta. Delta floods were a progressive disaster. Until this ancient pattern of river cycling could be restrained, the Delta would never be planted in the intense manner that other regions of the cotton South experienced (Cobb 1992) (Figure 7).

Many of the earliest settlements in the Delta have vanished. The first known Anglo American village in Bolivar County was called Prentiss. Bolivar County was named after the Latin American revolutionary, Simón Bolívar. An early resident of the county admired the Venezuelan hero, and saw to it that the county bore his name. Prentiss, like most early Delta towns, was built above a navigable landing on the natural levee of the Mississippi. There the founders built a few structures related to the purpose of cotton production: a dry goods store, a boarding house, a few saloons and eventually a courthouse. Because they built close to the river, these towns were subject to the destructive forces that such a river could unleash. Prentiss was abandoned when it fell into the river, a victim of the river's mighty current that eroded the bank at the edge of town.

During a period of Mississippi River low water in 1954, hunters stumbled across the lost town, and the area (near present day Rosedale) became a chaotic scene of excitement as newspapermen from throughout the region came to report on the lost city. Many residents of Rosedale retrieved bricks from the old courthouse. All along the Mississippi in the Delta there are towns, hamlets, and landings that today are abandoned (or nearly so) that were once thriving places with all the excitement and intensity associated with outposts of agricultural encroachment. These towns on the edge of the Delta had a character that might be described as "western" by our standards today. In the early 1800s, the Mississippi River was indeed in the west since the United States had only begun to expand into the region. The planters who came into, and

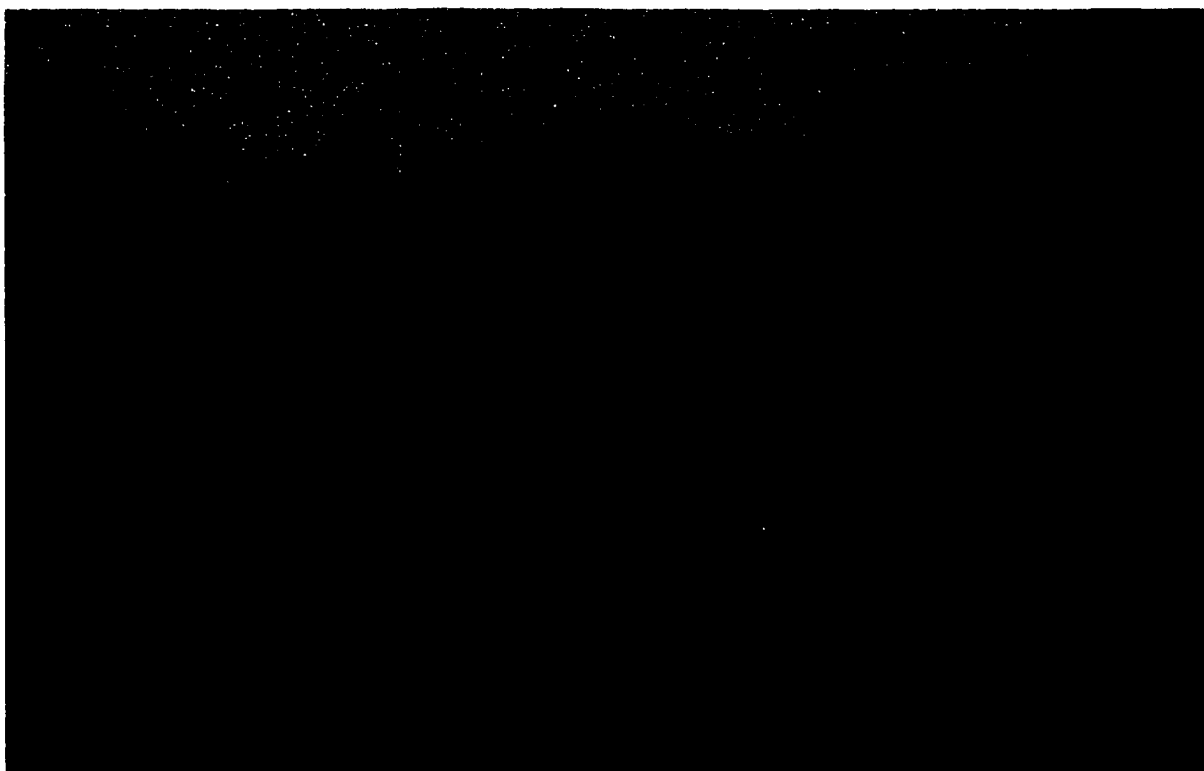


Figure 7. The Bouge Phalia River, Bolivar County, Mississippi.

planted cotton in, such an environment had much to lose and even more to gain. Saloons and churches still thrive in many of these places just as they did in the nineteenth century; everything else has vanished. All that is left are place names on maps and a few scattered settlements (Williams 1948).

For these pioneer planters, the river was their connection to distant markets and resources. Before them lay an unpredictably dangerous river and behind them stood a thick forest that seemed to hold complete control over the rich soil on which it thrived. To have any hope of carving out enough space to plant a reasonably profitable cotton crop, these planters needed a large labor force. Slave labor was the only profitable answer to this practical planting dilemma, since the prospect of hiring labor to come into a harsh environment to do backbreaking work was probably not considered and would never have made sense in their ledger books. Slave labor was the only way for these men to open the Delta wilderness and to get rich. The prospect of clearing such wilderness required large amounts of cash and credit that were not available to small-scale farmers in the United States at the time, so the Delta became a venue for white cotton planters with a lot of money and even more credit. Thus began a production system that would dominate the Mississippi Delta for more than one hundred years; it was a system that relied on capital supplied by a small class of wealthy planters and labor supplied by a much larger class of impoverished and enslaved African Americans. Slaves throughout the American South became aware of the difficult fate that might await them if they were sold in this region and with this fear in mind, the phrase “sold down the river” took on a more ominous meaning (Cobb 1992).

As more and more land along the riverfront went into cotton production, planters began looking into the Delta's interior for additional acreage. Land along the region's major streams were the first and logical choice because it was easy to load cotton onto shallow draft steam barges and float the product down to Greenwood or Vicksburg, two of the Delta's largest—increasingly the South's—cotton markets. Will Dockery's plantation is an example of such an interior site. Dockery recalls:

Land began having a value in about 1895 and 1896, and people began clearing and going farther back from the bayous and lakes, where land was not well drained. (Williams 1948, 171)

Located inside a wide meander of the Sunflower River, Dockery Farms was one of the first successful plantations in the Delta backwoods. By the time of his death in 1936 Will Dockery had added to his plantation until he owned nearly twenty thousand acres (Figure 8). Dockery founded the plantation in the 1880s, just as the Delta was experiencing a period of phenomenal growth that largely was attributable to the construction of a major rail line through the region. Although the rail line ran a mere seven miles to the west of his land, it made more sense to float his crop 130 miles by river to the market at Vicksburg. On the banks of the Sunflower, Dockery commissioned the construction of an elaborate system of pulleys to load cotton onto waiting barges in the river below (Figure 9). Eventually, Will Dockery had a branch rail line built that linked his operation to the main line at Boyle and the river port at Rosedale. Locals called the branch "The Peavine," apparently because of its circuitous route as it made its way through the Delta backcountry. The pioneer blues musician Charley Patton immortalized the railroad in the song *Peavine Blues*. The track is gone today, but the rail bed is still visible in places (Figures 10 and 11) (Hemphill 1980).

Like all plantations in the Delta, Dockery relied on a massive labor force, most of whom were black, to run his operation. In the years before mechanization, Dockery employed hundreds of families on his place. Planters in the Delta carried with them a reputation in the black community based on their treatment of farm tenants, and by most accounts, Will Dockery was a fair landowner. Ruffin Scott, who lived and worked on the Dockery Place most of his life, commented, "Yea, Mr. Will was a good man." By most accounts, Will's son Joe Rice carried on his father's reputation as a good employer and landlord. Speaking of Joe Rice Dockery in 1938, the *National Negro Digest* wrote,

"When it comes to giving sharecroppers and all workers a fair chance to earn an honest living, young Mr. Joe Rice Dockery, of Dockery Mississippi, sets a fine example."

Mrs. Keith Dockery McLean, Joe Rice's widow, still lives in the house on the Sunflower River built by the elder Dockery. In addition to transportation, flood control has always been a central concern to Delta farmers. In the first decades of settlement in the Delta, planters made little attempt to protect themselves from the frequent overflows of the Mississippi; the task was too great (Figure 12). Some farmers did, however, place earthen levees along certain portions of their crops, but these efforts were often in vain, and had little effect in high water periods. These levees were usually two to three feet high and were built by slave labor using farming implements (Harrison and Mooney 1993). It became apparent to Delta planters that they could not protect themselves from the financial disasters that were the inevitable product of untimely flooding. Although Delta farmers were, and still are, a conservative group politically, they recognized that it would require massive



Figure 8. Will Dockery and Joe Rice Dockery, ca. 1914. Photograph provided courtesy of Keith Dockery McClean.

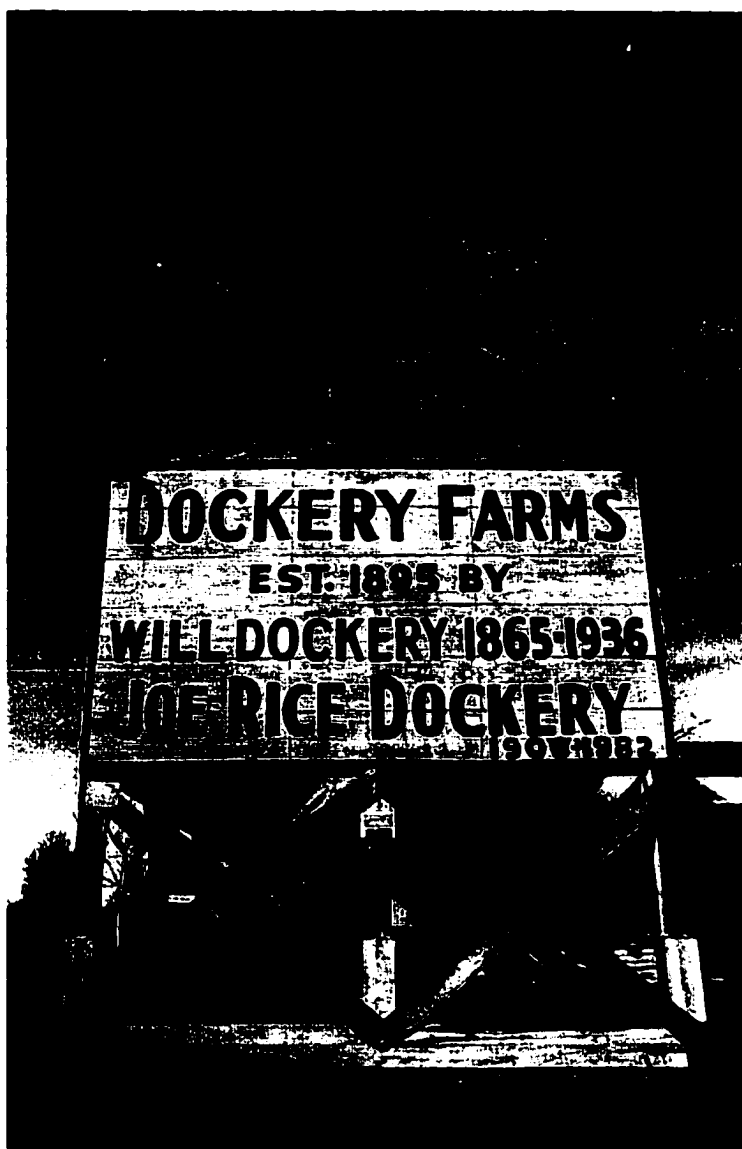


Figure 9. Old Cotton Gin at Dockery Farms



Figure 10. Trestle Abutments for the Peavine Railroad. Photograph made at Malvina, Mississippi, and depicts the Bouge Phalia River.

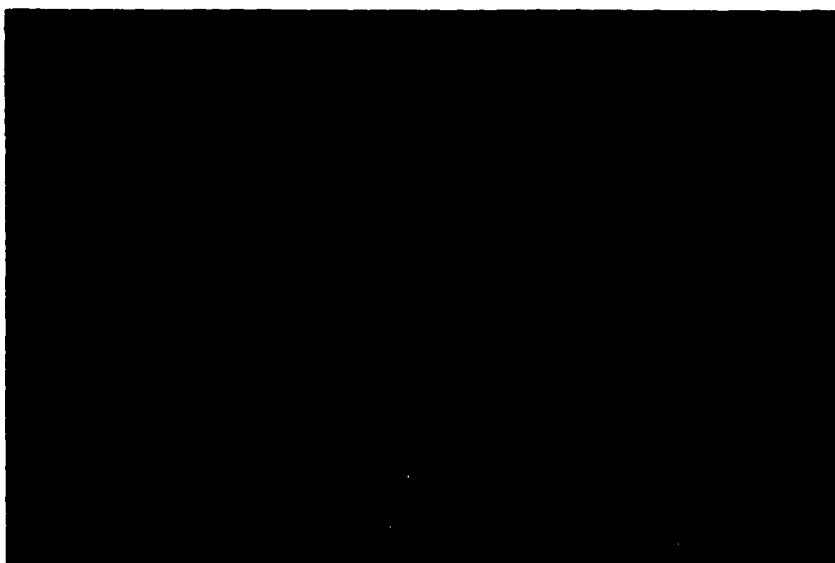


Figure 11. 1929 Cadastral Map of Malvina, Mississippi. Map shows Peavine Crossing of the Bouge Phalia depicted in Figure 10.

amounts of outside capital to contain the river. Such capital could never be raised locally and the only solution was to rely on the largess of the state and federal governments. In the early 1800s, the Mississippi legislature began appropriating funds for the construction of Delta levees. Locally, counties formed a network County Boards of Police to supervise the construction and maintenance of levees (Barry 1998).

At the national level, Congress passed the Swampland Act in the 1850s, a piece of legislation that opened the way to extensive federal presence in Delta agriculture. The act allowed for the United States government to give all of its Delta acreage to the state of Mississippi. In turn, the state would sell its newly acquired land to planters and settlers in the region, with the proceeds going towards the construction of main line levees along the river. Mississippi received 3.9 million acres of land in the deal. This transfer of land resulted in a significant increase in the state-assessed value of property in the region: \$9.8 million in 1853 and \$23 million in 1857 (Harrison and Mooney 1993).

Ethnicity

Many writers over the years have made the argument that the Mississippi Delta is a quintessential Southern place, but its ethnic composition makes it a place that is unlike other regions in the South. The main difference is the Delta's ethno-history. Jews, Chinese, Lebanese, Mexicans, and Italians all have played a part in the development of Delta identity. The fact that the Delta includes the presence of these ethnic groups in its population sets it apart from the rest of the South that is characterized mainly by African Americans and Europeans of British Isles descent. The

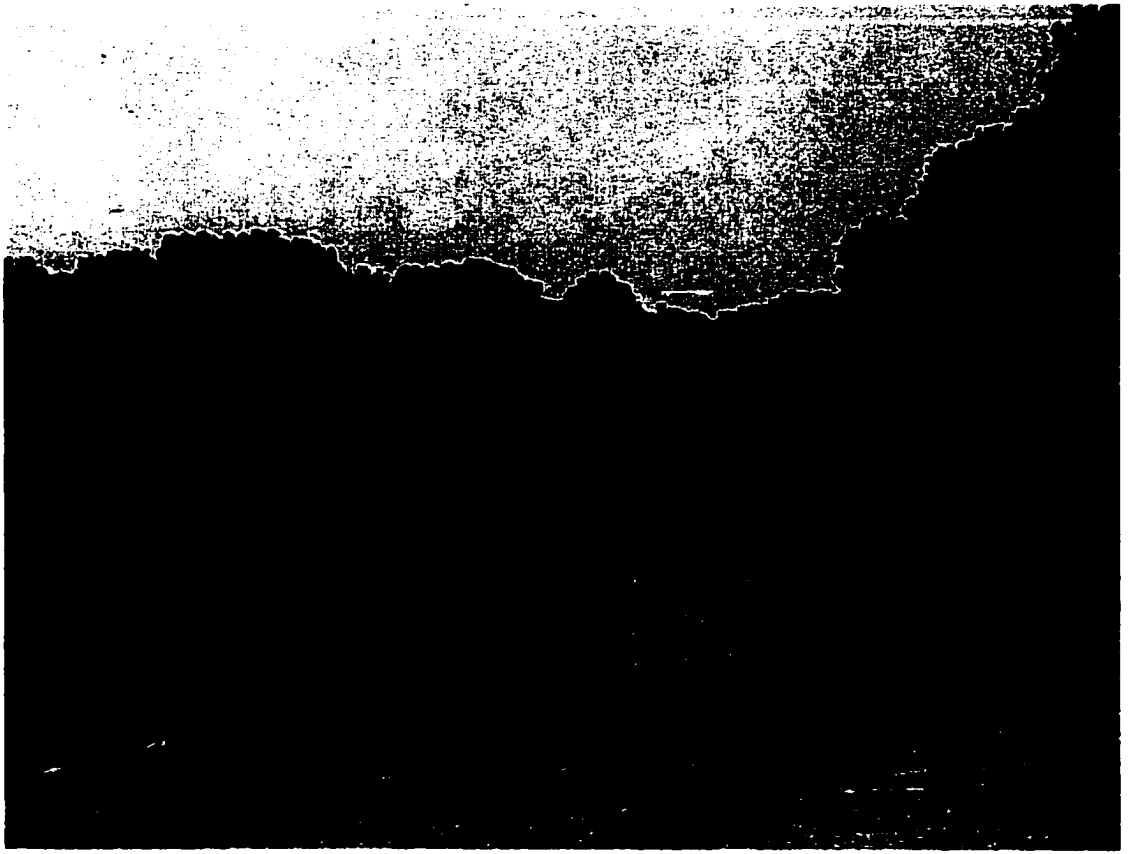


Figure 12. Mainline Levee on the Mississippi River. Photograph of modern (post-1927 flood) levee made at Terene Landing, Mississippi.

Delta owes its ethnic complexity to two factors: the era in which the region came to agricultural power, and the constant need for farm labor.

The Delta developed late as an agricultural region. The region was opened to white settlement only after 1830 with the signing of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. Under force of arms, this treaty ceded Choctaw land to the young state of Mississippi, and thousands of Choctaws joined the Trail of Tears to the West. Cotton regions in the East began to play out after the end of the Civil War just as planting in the Delta took off. After the chaos of the post war years had settled—chaos related to the stabilization of a tenant system and the recapture of white political control—the Delta entered a period of phenomenal growth and development. Census and ethnographic data near the turn of the century show that these were years of massive in migration of people (mostly blacks) to the Delta. These years were also a time of phenomenal immigration to the United States as a whole; around one million people per year immigrated to the United States. In addition, this migration era was a time when the geographic origin of the majority of American immigrants began to change from the Northern European stock that had been dominant since the late eighteenth century to an Eastern and Southern European stock. As these Italians, Eastern European Jews, Lebanese, and others entered the country, they looked for economic opportunities (Figure 13). For many, the booming agricultural economy of the Mississippi Delta provided an opportunity for success. Among these immigrants, Jewish and Lebanese merchants in particular looked to the Delta and its huge rural population as a potential market for their household wares (Dattle 2000).

The Italian story is linked closely to the persistent labor demands of Delta cotton planters. At the same time that cotton acreage was expanding and labor demands were increasing, Italian immigration to the United States was exploding. Major planters such as Leroy Percy in Greenville hoped to free themselves of their so-called “Negro Problem” by adding Italian peasant farmer immigrants to their tenant ranks. Labor agents representing Delta farmers actually went to Italy and recruited farmers there to come seek their fortunes in the Mississippi Delta. Upon arrival in the Delta, many Italians found the Delta system of farm tenancy little better than that they had fled in the Old World. Like blacks, they found the agricultural ladder difficult, if not impossible to climb. The Italian government went so far as to place signs in Italian train stations that encouraged emigrants to stay away from Mississippi Delta farms. Successive generations of Italian immigrants did, however, become landowners (Barry 1998). Today many family farm operations among Italians are among the largest, and most profitable, operations in the Delta.

Chinese immigrants, likewise, found an available market among the masses of black farm laborers and established a pattern of Chinese American grocery stores in the Delta. Many are still in operation in the region, although, like many of these ethnic groups there is an increasing tendency toward ethnic integration. Nevertheless, there are few places in the South where one may find a Chinese Baptist Church; such churches exist in the Delta.

It is difficult to say what impact this ethnic heritage has had on black return migration. Perhaps the Delta seems a welcoming ethnic place given its abundance and



Figure 13. The Rest Haven Restaurant. This restaurant in Clarksdale, Mississippi is operated by ethnic Lebanese owners.

diversity of ethnic groups. The Delta's ethnic complexity may have given rise to a kind of racial knowledge and tolerance in living space that more homogenous regions of the South lack. Certainly there is a continuum of whiteness and power in the Delta and those in the middle—Jews, Chinese, and Italians—have found life easier than blacks. Blacks may, however, feel a sense of community because there are others battling under the same system and culture.

Post Civil War Land Ownership and Land Tenancy

The system of land ownership and tenancy, called sharecropping, which developed in the post-war South is a central theme in understanding Southern social and economic events in the last one hundred thirty-five years. Although the system died out in the 1950s, its legacy lives on in a number of ways. Delta patterns of economic power, race, education, income, and social pathologies can, in part, be attributed to the indignities that sharecropping brought to landless black peasants. Whites and blacks occupied the lowest levels of power and wealth in sharecropping, but by 1910, 92 percent of sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta were black. In Mississippi, outside the Delta, 63 percent of all sharecroppers were black. So to discuss sharecropping in the Delta is to discuss an economic system run by white planters and worked by black farmers (Cobb 1992).

Few topics in the South have generated as much myth as the origins of the sharecropping system. According to popular Southern belief among many whites, the end of the Civil War brought about an end to a grand civilization. The war's end found a once proud and prosperous landed gentry without its helpful and happy slaves. Drunk with freedom, the freed slaves swept into town and lived a hedonistic life of drinking

and leisure. In the popular 1939 film, *Gone With the Wind*, for example, the beautiful and indefatigable Scarlett goes into town on business and is shocked to see the idle and wild former slaves roaming the streets as evil and dirty Yankee soldiers stand by in silent approval. As the myth continues, the freed slaves soon come to the end of their party and realize that they miss Ole' Master and Ole' Miss and the land that they had worked and loved; they return to their plantation home where their former owners receive them like prodigal sons and daughters. Together, former slave and former master look out across the fallow and wars ravaged fields, and understand that they must get back to work to rebuild the plantation to its former greatness. Each understands that the other has something that makes a whole of parts: the former owner his land, the former slave his labor. The freedmen and women understand the fact that the master has no money to pay in wages, so the two enter into an agreement in which the former slaves will work the land and receive payment by keeping a share of the crop at harvest. Everyone involved sees that it is a fair deal and that the arrangement will provide a brighter future, and possibly the accumulation of wealth, not only for the landowner, but for the former slave also. Never was a more perfect plan devised.

This myth disregards what actually happened in the South's political economy in the first years after the Civil War, just as it ignores the relationships of power and race that shaped all human interactions in that time and place. As the Civil War ended, planters throughout the South were faced with several difficult problems. Foremost among their concerns must have been determining a way that they were going to make crops and income in an agricultural system that had been revolutionized by emancipation. Planters must also have been troubled by the notion that they might have

to negotiate in some form of good faith with their former slaves to secure farm labor. Since they had always held the position of slave master over these newly freed people, such an idea must have been absurd, or perhaps abhorrent. Finally, there was the paramount issue of capital. Even in the era before mechanization, farming was an endeavor that required outlays of cash months before any profit could be realized. Such a situation required credit. Banks throughout the South were devastated in 1865 and were unable to secure large amounts of capital loans from Northern banks that wanted to wait to determine how the Southern economy would conduct itself in the wake of military defeat. Southern planters were compelled to find a new way to become a productive agricultural class (Wright 1986).

In contrast to the myth of sharecropping in which the new system smoothly fell into place, the new system actually was devised by trial and error. The myth fails to see the process as one of negotiation. Free African Americans in the South understood farming—they had been farmers in the South for over two hundred years and had had a longer tradition working the land in Africa—and they understood that white planters needed their skills. Out of this relationship grew a process whereby black laborers sought to parlay their farming talents into economic and political advantage. Rather than look shoulder to shoulder across war ravaged fields hoping for a resurrected plantation, white landowners and black laborers looked across a figurative negotiating table to make a deal that might serve the needs of both. Surely racial power roles were in place that weakened the African American negotiating position, but nevertheless, whites had to recognize that blacks were no longer enslaved. Blacks hoped to become

landowners themselves and knew that the two things they possessed to attain that goal were their labor and knowledge of farming (Wright 1986).

It is doubtful that anyone can say with certainty exactly where sharecropping began. The Mississippi Delta was, however, a proving ground, if not the region of origin, of sharecropping. In the crop year that followed the end of the War several planters in the Delta experimented with wage labor with limited success. Capital was scarce in the post-war South, and thus, there was little cash on hand with which to pay farm laborers. Capital scarcity combined with disastrous flooding in the lower Mississippi Valley to make wage labor impossible and unprofitable (Cobb 1992).

The myth of sharecropping also misses the point that there were a variety of tenant-landowner arrangements being used in the South between 1865 and full mechanization. In the 1950s, the basic difference in the arrangements involved the amount of risk and resources that each party brought to the crop. Some scholars have described the assortment of farming arrangements as an agriculture ladder because there was a progression of independence, responsibility, risk, and potential for profit that rose for one party or the other as the particulars of the arrangement changed. Sharecroppers occupied the bottom rung of the ladder since all they brought to the endeavor was their labor. A share contract signed in Bolivar County in 1930 reads:

This contract made and entered into by and between General Scott party of the first part, and Zeke Wright party of the second part, WITNESSETH:

That the party of the first part hereby agrees to furnish to the party of the second part a certain tract of land on the Evelyn Place, and to furnish team, feed for team, and implements to work the said land free of cost to the second party.

That, the party of the second part agrees to furnish all the labor necessary to work the said land, and to gather and prepare the crops raised thereon for marketing; and to gather and house all corn that may be raised on said land.

All crops grown on said land, cotton, cotton seed, corn and any other crop grown on said land, or the proceeds thereof, to be equally divided between the first and second parties, after the party of the second part has paid for all monies and supplies furnished him by party of the first part.

Witness our hands this first day of February, 1930. Witness, Carolyn C. Nugent (Scott 1930).

Tenants usually lived adjacent to their allotted plot, and the entire family helped in raising the crop. The planter supplied all that was necessary for the crop's production and the family's living needs. Plantation bookkeepers kept tedious records concerning everything the planter supplied, or "furnished," to the sharecropper. The planter charged interest (often usurious) on all dry goods supplies, such as shoes, clothes, and food, while at the same time charging fees for the use of farm animals and implements. At the end of the crop year the tenant and landowner split the crop, each taking half. The planter calculated the total value of all that had been furnished to the tenant and his family during the year and subtracted that amount from the earnings on the sharecropper's half. Imbedded in this system is one of the more insidious aspects of the sharecrop arrangement; tenants were not allowed to sell their own-half at market, therefore the tenant often did not know whether the planter was being honest about the weight and value of his half of the crop. An endemic situation for sharecroppers in the Delta is that they often ended the season in debt, and that debt could be carried over to future years, creating a debt so crushing that it could never be overcome (Cobb 1992).

One step up the agricultural ladder from sharecropping was share renting, an arrangement in which the tenant farmer supplied some farm implements and a portion of the fertilizer. The planter provided housing, land, and fuel. At the end of the season, the tenant paid the planter a share of his crop, usually one-third to one half. Share

renters held a higher degree of independence and respect in the community that was related to their acquisition of personal wealth and the fact that they were risking their own property in the pursuit of profit. Clearly, the bourgeois ethic of capitalist accumulation had permeated the freedmen class. Ruffin Scott, a long-time resident of Dockery's black community and one of my informants, came from a family who were share renters for Will Dockery. Ruffin's wife Dorothy claims that her husband's family always had a "second hand" car and that they were considered "well-off." Ruffin remembers that his parents sharecropped for "Mr. Will" the first few years they moved to Dockery. The family had migrated north from Utica, Mississippi, where Ruffin recalls, "The boll weevil done run us out of there." Ruffin's family came into the Delta, as did thousands of other black families in the early 1900s, hoping to find agricultural success in the dynamic region. Eventually, claims Ruffin, the family would make as much as 1,500 dollars in a season (Scott 1998).

At the top of the ladder was cash renting, an arrangement in which the tenant paid a fixed rent for each acre planted or agreed to exchange a certain value of the harvested cotton that depended on the price received at market that year. In cash renting, the planter also supplied the housing, land, and fuel. Since the tenant bore much of the risk in this arrangement (prices may fall or the crop may fail) his family stood to earn more profit than in the other production schemes (Cobb 1992).

In 1913 the United States Department of Agriculture did a study of Southern farming practices that looked at the various systems of tenant farming. The study was particularly interested in the profit margins of the different systems. As mentioned above, situations in which tenants had most to lose were the same situations in which

they had most to gain. Sharecroppers earned an average of three hundred thirty-three dollars while share renters cleared an average of three hundred ninety-eight dollars per year. Cash renters earned an annual average of four hundred seventy-eight dollars. Likewise, planters earned more money when they had more invested in the crop through tenant supplies and housing. The planter received an average of a 6.6 percent annual return on his investment when the arrangement was cash renting, 11.8 percent with share renting, and 13.6 percent when working with sharecroppers. These are average figures and would be significantly higher for both parties during a particularly good crop year; a sharecropper might clear 1,000 dollars at the same time that a landlord could receive a 25 percent profit on his investment, a healthy profit in any financial dealing. Throughout the years, landlords often complained about the difficulties and frustrations involved in the sharecropping system—they usually meant problems in dealing with black farmers—yet it is illuminating to note that it was the most profitable arrangement available to them at the time. There is no shortage of evidence that many planters made fortunes under a system that many remember as intolerable (Brandfon 1967).

Sharecroppers and other tenants often had a difficult time exercising any real sovereignty over their own lives when they worked on land they did not own with tools that were not theirs, usually under the weight of crushing debt. For such tenants, one of the only acts of independence that they could employ was the freedom of movement. At the end of each crop year many tenants sought better or fairer economic conditions on another plantation. Some tenants, who were deeply in debt, would flee to a distant plantation to escape the hopeless situation of lifelong economic dependence. Not

uncommonly, a landlord searched for these “escaped” debtors to claim what they believed was owed to them. It was just as common, however, for landlords to write off such losses as a cost of doing business where the labor relations involved masses of impoverished (and as some whites believed, “child-like”) blacks. From the point of view of indebted blacks, much of their debt was unjustified because of interest rates added to their “purchased” goods. Interest rates of 20 percent or more were not an uncommon rate for clothes purchased on credit, or furnished, in these plantation stores. On top of the high interest, commissaries often marked up items unfairly before interest charges were added at the end of the year. Tenants on remote plantations often had no other choice but to shop in these stores since they lacked transportation and free time. Some plantation owners paid their workers with plantation script (coins or bills) that was good for purchases only in the plantation commissary, depriving tenants the option of buying goods in cash stores in town where prices were usually lower (Powdermaker 1939).

An almost total lack of legal rights for blacks was imbedded in this system. Ironically, the sharecropping system seemed fair, since there always was the possibility that a tenant could work, save well, and rise to the level of landowner. William Alexander Percy, perhaps the most articulate of apologists for the Delta’s landowning class, wrote in his beautifully written book *Lanterns on the Levee* that there was never a happier people working in a system better suited for peasant welfare than sharecropping. The problem with this argument is that the system did not take place in a cultural vacuum; it developed in a place of institutional racism where African Americans were considered little more than chattel property. For an economic system

or a society to work fairly for everyone, the rules must be applied equally to all. Equal protection under the law is a central theme in the United States Constitution and was placed there for the newly freed slaves. Nevertheless, blacks in the South were routinely denied rights and property without due process of law. The South is heir today of a society that has taken shape under such conditions, and although much has changed for the better in the region, echoes remain of the former regime (Percy 1941).

One curious aspect of African American history in the American South is why so many blacks stayed in the South after emancipation. Perhaps the answer is that blacks had made a home and a culture in the South since their arrival in the New World as slaves. With the end of the Civil War, African Americans continued, in large numbers, to try to build lives that were rooted in that land. Agriculture was the main occupation that former slaves had knowledge about and maybe they understood that the burgeoning factories in the North were not socially prepared to accept them into the mainstream work force. Therefore, as late as 1900, more than 90 percent of all blacks in the United States still lived in the South (Lemann 1991). Blacks in the region, it seemed, were not ready to give up on the region that they had, for generations, called home. As has been the case for farmers and peasants everywhere, they dreamed of landownership and independence.

At the end of the Civil War, the freedmen and freedwomen had reason to believe that they would soon become landowners. The federal government had promised as much when it established the Freedman's Bureau whose responsibilities included the redistribution of land formerly owned by white planters. Early indications were that the former slaves would receive small plots of land that had been seized by Northern troops

during the course of the war. Several such transfers did take place, including the purchase of land that became known as Mound Bayou in central Bolivar County. Ultimately, however, these dreams of landownership and land redistribution were dashed when on July 1, 1865, President Andrew Johnson signed an order that returned all Southern land, then in possession of the Freedmen's Bureau, to planters who took an amnesty oath or who had been granted a pardon by federal officials. National policies of reconciliation between North and South after the war led officials in Washington to redistribute the plan. As 1867 came to an end, the restitution of federally confiscated Southern land had been reversed. There were, however, rumors circulating in the black community that there was to be a Christmas gift to freed slaves of land, and many held out for this possibility, but, of course, it never occurred. Still, blacks remained hopeful that they might attain the same dreams of landownership by working hard and saving and dealing with the white power structure (Cobb 1992).

In the Delta today, poverty affects blacks more profoundly than whites and schools are still separate and unequal. By various indicators of health such as infant mortality, obesity, heart disease, and substance abuse, it becomes clear that blacks suffer at higher rates than whites in the Delta. Each of these issues is complex and cannot be attributed directly to the legacy of slavery and sharecropping, however, the problems mentioned here are easily connected to past policies and a culture of institutional racism. Black Americans who return to the Mississippi Delta know that it is a place where injustice and violence was committed against their ancestors and relatives. Part of the power and mystery in black return migration to the Mississippi

Delta is exploring how generations of black Mississippians have been able to call such a place home and how they can embrace it again by returning (Curry 1995).

Plantation Geographies, Past and Present

Plantation geography was a popular field of study for a conservative group of Southern scholars who grew up in the region just as changes in the economy remade the South into a new and mechanized place. Among the keenest of these observers was geographer Merle Prunty at the University of Georgia. Prunty was interested in population settlement patterns that were associated with the historical periods of plantation production. One theme in his work is the fact that black settlement patterns in the Southern plantation environment have been shaped by economic systems designed by ruling whites since the South was opened to European style agricultural in the late eighteenth century. Even today, black settlement patterns in the Delta are linked to relatively recent changes in the region's plantation economy (Aiken 1985).

During slavery, planters kept their labor in concentrated residential units to supervise activities in slave quarters. Slave housing was often adjacent to the master's home, while some slaves lived under the same roof as the owner. The daily work routine of field laborers was to go out from their concentrated residences to work the distant fields and to return to the plantation core in the evening. This spatial organization placed slaves under strict and constant control (Prunty 1955).

With emancipation and the rise of tenant farming, the former slaves hoped to be free of such strict supervision. One element of sharecropping that tenants valued was that they were no longer under constant supervision. For sharecroppers, to work a distant plot of land at the edge of the landowner's property meant that they could expect

a considerable amount of time free from the planter's gaze. The geographic result of this spatial pattern was a dispersal of blacks across the landscape. United States Geological Survey maps of the Delta from the 1930s reveal countless single-family homes along every major road and many dirt lanes. Rural churches, stores, juke houses, and commissaries comprised a space of densely populated agricultural life and often plays a large role in the memories of older black return migrants (Prunty 1955).

In the summer of 1999 I spent an afternoon riding around rural Bolivar County with an elderly black man who had long ago moved to Cleveland, Ohio. He was in the Delta for the Maggie Foster Family reunion, and while the pork ribs sizzled on the fire, we slipped away to find the sites where he spent his youth. As we drove, his sight turned inward and he pointed out places where former families had lived, places where he had worked, burial plots, and sites of intense memories. In one case, he pointed to the middle of a field and told a story of his father's passing and how the hearse had to back down a long muddy road to get to the house. His voice dropped low, and he seemed to speak to himself looking out at his fallen father across the cotton where I saw an empty field (Foster 1999).

The Great Flood and the New Deal

The early decades of the twentieth century was a time of phenomenal growth in the production of crops in the Delta. As more and more financial resources were invested in the Delta, along the Mississippi River—a landscape prone to inundation—planters became increasingly hopeful that their meager levees were up to the task of containing the great river. Financial responsibility for Delta flood protection steadily moved away from the local level, up the federal ladder, to the state, and then the

national level. As a result, protection became more and more effective. The issue was related primarily to the financing of flood control measures and not to technological expertise, which planters possessed or could buy through their consultants. It was necessary, however, to spend large amounts of money to affect these flood control plans, amounts which only governments control. The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, the worst in American history, created the necessary climate for political change that would draw the federal government even more deeply into the Delta with a full and proprietary commitment to regional flood control (Barry 1998).

While the federal government's role in financing Delta flood control was incalculably important in the field of civil engineering, it also had unintended consequences. African American farmers were impacted by these new federal dollars in ways that few anticipated. Certainly, blacks in the Delta received few direct financial benefits from federal intervention in the levee construction that was precipitated by the Flood Control Act of 1928. It did, however, have a transforming impact on the region's large black population in that this new money (under programs that followed) began to be funneled into farm mechanization, a process that eventually ended most black participation in Delta agriculture (Barry 1998).

Many historians of the American South agree that Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal provided the necessary capital for Southern farmers and planters to mechanize, to the extent that they no longer required massive inputs of human labor. The end result was that African Americans lost the one political and economic tool that they had traditionally used to gain relative advantage in their dealings with whites: their labor. As had often been the case in the Delta, events seemingly unrelated to labor issues, like

flooding, found their way back to what had always been the primary concern of Delta planters—a reliable pool of labor (Woods 2000).

The act of Congress that had the greatest impact on agricultural production in the Delta and the South as a whole was the Agriculture Adjustment Act of 1933 (AAA). This law was a major part of Roosevelt's New Deal and was designed to stabilize economic chaos in America's agricultural sector. For decades, farmers throughout the country had battled against fluctuations in the commodities markets. As prices fell in a given year, farmers, like any entrepreneur, suffered great financial losses as their costs of production exceeded the return that they could garner on the market. Federal officials viewed this situation as a threat to the nation's food and production oriented commodities and a threat to rural life in general. The AAA called for reductions in crop acreage and offered farmers guaranteed prices for their crops in exchange for their willingness to follow federal mandates in crop planning and implementation. Some of these principles had already been experimented with in the Mississippi Delta. Several leading Delta planters like Washington County planter Leroy Percy and Bolivar County's Walter Sillers, Sr., had urged previously that planters ought to agree to limitations in cotton acreage as a means to keep prices high. Without some kind of enforcement or tangible incentive (such as federal price guarantees) such attempts at regional farm planning were unsuccessful. If they saw an opportunity to make a better profit than the voluntary limitations would allow, individual farmers were likely to plant crops beyond the agreed upon limits (Kirby 1987).

In the planting year following passage of the AAA, cotton acreage declined dramatically at the same time that federal capital began to flow into the Delta in

amounts that were matched only by federal spending on levee construction. Much of this capital went to finance mechanization in Southern agriculture, thereby making black labor unnecessary. By 1940, the Delta accounted for almost one half of all the state's tractors, and with the increasing usage of farm chemicals and modern farming practices, yields per acre increased by more than 40 percent. By the end of the decade, the amount of land being worked by tenants of all categories fell by 23.7 percent.

Another result of the implementation of the AAA in the Delta was a massive surge in African American unemployment and mass evictions (Woods 2000). Production data from 1930 to 1940 show that cotton acreage declined by 39 percent, and subsequently, the number of sharecroppers shrank by 9.4 percent. Share renters were higher on the agricultural ladder, and stood to benefit more from the AAA, a situation that made them a target for eviction. Heading off these federal payments to share tenants, planters threw them off the land in droves, such that the number of share renters fell by 66.2 percent in the 1930s. In addition, the amount of acreage farmed by sharecroppers dropped by 21.3 percent. Sharecroppers began working new land vacated by other (higher status) tenants on a cash wage basis, an arrangement that they did not enjoy. Surveys among laborers of the day suggest that 76 percent would rather have farmed on shares than become a wage laborer (Cobb 1992).

The evictions that came in the wake of AAA cotton acreage reductions led to the largest waves of black out-migration from the South in history. Although there is little data for Delta out-migration in that era, figures for the south as a whole show how the 1930s, and its associated beginnings of mechanization, led to increased migration. The 1930s were a time of decreasing migration in comparison to the 1920s. This may be

due to the fact that in the 1930s the United States was still in the throes of the Great Depression in addition to the fact that mechanization did not take hold until after the introduction of a mass produced mechanical cotton picker. Compared to the 1930s, the 1940s saw a doubling in black out-migration from the South. The argument here is not that the AAA was directly responsible for an increase in black out-migration, but that the capital associated with AAA made access to increasing mechanization feasible even for farmers of relatively modest means (Woods 2000).

The Post-New Deal Delta

As mechanization took hold and was completed in the 1950s and 1960s, there ceased to be an economic reason for people to live in the rural Delta since laborers were no longer needed to work the fields that they had previously tended. Although migration to cities outside and inside the rural South is widely documented, less attention goes to the growth in small urban places in the rural south (Marks 1989). In the Mississippi Delta, many blacks who were driven from the land moved to nearby towns and cities, which had been centers of majority white populations (Aiken 1985). Today, many of these same towns are majority black and are increasingly controlled by African American political leaders (Parker 1999). These are the towns that are the main centers for black return migration to the Delta. Although migrants who return to the Delta may be elderly and have a tie to some rural place, they usually choose to return to the urban Delta. In many cases, rural churches have been relocated to nearby towns. Others remain in rural areas, constituting one of the only community-oriented fixtures on the rural Delta landscape (Rankin 1993).

Poverty in the Modern Delta

Today, the Mississippi Delta is among the poorest regions in the United States. There is, however, a wealthy class and a growing middle class in the region. Since most of the poverty exists in the black community it is important to understand these conditions since black return migrants will live in the community even if they are not in poverty themselves. There is near constant attention placed on poverty in the Delta. President Clinton visited Clarksdale in the summer of 1999 while on a poverty tour of the United States. A brief examination of health and welfare statistics reveals the difficult situation that is daily life for many Deltans. One out of every five families is poor in the Mississippi Delta, a rate of poverty that is twice the national average. Blacks are not the only group living in poverty in the Delta, but they do exhibit the highest rates of any sub group. Perhaps most distressing is the fact that one in two African American children born in the Delta is born into poverty. This condition is, in part, a legacy of the sharecropping system that employed blacks in far greater numbers than whites. Those insidious qualities of sharecropping that served to keep the black working class in a position of dependency have helped create a modern situation in the Delta of grinding poverty and social instability (Bureau of the Census 1990).

One way that the Delta's history of racial oppression remains evident today is related to the deplorable education that was common for black students in the era of Jim Crow segregation. In that time, whites controlled the school systems for both white and black students. Schools were funded from a statewide system that allocated funds on the basis of the number of children taught in a district. Black students, as well as whites, were included in this enumeration. Inevitably, black schools were severely

under funded. For example, in the school year of 1929-1930, the funding rate ration between white to black students was seven to one in Washington County. In the same year, Bolivar County spent a mere 34 percent of the money allocated for black schools on those schools; white students received the remainder. Whites in power understood that African Americans in the Mississippi Delta were to be relegated to agricultural labor. As a result, the school year for black students was structured around the planting season. During times of intense labor, such as planting and harvesting, black children did not attend classes, but rather, they were available to work their family's land—land usually farmed on shares for a white landowner (Cobb 1992).

This inequitable tradition in Delta education left generations of blacks uneducated and ill prepared to deal with life outside of their world of dependent agricultural labor. The system's cumulative effect can still be observed in the Delta today. Developmental psychologists insist that one of a child's most important teachers is his or her parent. If that parent, or care-giving grandparent, is relatively uneducated, that child will begin life at an educational disadvantage. The problem is generational, and thus difficult to correct. The economic outcome of this legacy of under investment in black education is that many of these young people enter the workforce without the basic skills needed to perform the tasks that modern employers demand. This is not to argue that there is a so-called "culture of poverty" in the Delta, a phrase that came out of the 1960s era War on Poverty, but that the children of undereducated adults have a difficult time in overcoming obstacles that the children of affluent, well-educated, parents do not. Recently I sat in on a community discussion in which there were people of retirement age, both black and white, participating. One elderly white man recalled

with pride that the schools (white schools) of his Delta youth were exceptionally good. “We had four years of Latin back then,” he exclaimed. Black retirees in the room listened expressionless and stunned in the knowledge that Latin had never been offered in their schools.

Poverty rates tend to be most brutal for households with children led by women, a fact that is important in this study because such family arrangements are so common among returnees. A shocking 75 percent of woman-maintained households with children live below the poverty level. An old debate is embedded in this statistic. For decades, scholars have noted that African American families are more likely to be headed by a single woman. Determining why this is the case is a matter that remains unexplained. One argument holds that the pattern is part of a cultural system of African American matrilinealism. If this is true, then it is another example of how African Americans have suffered by being forced into an economic and social setting (one based on patriarchy and the nuclear family) that was not their own. A recent study uses a novel methodology to make the opposite argument that families headed by single women are a phenomenon new to the urban African American community, not a transplant from the rural South (Tolnay 1997).

Tolnay tracks family patterns in the black community by comparing family composition among black households living in the rural South before the Great Black Migration and families living in the urban North as a result of the epic move. The research used data from the Public Use Micro Data Sample that focuses on detailed records of household structure. According to his findings, family situations where women constituted the head of household became more common after the Great Black

Migration. In his concluding remarks, the author argues that it was the negative impact of urban pathologies that led to “broken” families. Black return migration to the Mississippi Delta, therefore, may have brought this household structure to a place where it was not previously the prevailing pattern (Tolnay 1997).

During the 1990s the United States experienced some of the greatest rates of economic expansion in history. Again and again the Federal Reserve Board raised interest rates in an attempt to slow economic growth, thereby containing inflation. They argued that low unemployment rates associated with high rates of economic growth would eventually lead to higher wages and thus cause inflation. In these years, the United States attained the lowest unemployment numbers in modern history. The Delta did see some of this increase in economic activity and did see unemployment rates dip slightly, however, the region did not resemble the rest of the country in its economic success. In the spring of 2000, unemployment rates for the United States dipped below 4 percent while remaining a staggering 9.5 percent in the Mississippi Delta. In some Delta counties, unemployment was above 15 percent (Mississippi Employment Security Commission). If leaders and politicians were interested, they might use the Delta as a case study in regional development and try to find ways to combat poverty in a wealthy country that is in the midst of an unprecedented economic boom. The Delta has always held a mirror up to the rest of the country—a mirror that shines beneath the façade of what the country believes about itself, what the country chooses to believe it has become. Space between rich and poor in America grows and the Delta increasingly has become a place where this is more and more evident. This observation is important to black return migration to the Delta because it is taking place within this economic era of

national success and continued Delta impoverishment. Black return migrants are making a decision to come home to a poor place that stands in stark economic contrast to growing wealth in the country as a whole. How migrants make sense of this contrast is central to understanding the migration (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2000).

Sense of Place in the Delta

Studies concerned with place—and particularly sense of place—recently have become popular in the humanities. The concept is related to the more traditional field of regionalism that was popular in the field of geography in the 1930s. As a concept, place is more poetic than region; region implies an accounting of qualities that make an area in space distinct from other areas. As it is thought of in the humanities today, place attempts to conjure an image of what a place means or the imaginative impressions associated with a locale. Sense of place is an image that emerges from a melding of the physical setting, the social interaction going on in the place, and the public/personal memories and attitudes that an individual brings to the place. The Mississippi Delta possesses a powerful sense of place, a fact that is emphasized by the enormous amount of attention that the region receives in the popular press and academic circles. Those who are interested in the Delta, including blues enthusiasts, poverty researchers, public policy planners, photographers, ethnographers, and writers, seem to respond to the mere utterance of the phrase—Mississippi Delta—with a sense of awe or reverence. The phrase evokes various images for varied observers: blues for musicologists, race for historians and humanists, poverty for those interested in social justice, and a lost empire for romanticists of the Old South.

The Mississippi Delta is increasingly a unique place in the United States in that it is a place apart. This is not to say that the Delta is not a changing place and a place that is connected to the currents of national commerce and culture, but that the Delta is a place where locality and regional atmosphere is thick in the air. When one is in the Delta, one is almost always aware of being someplace; a feat that has become difficult in such thoroughly postmodern placeless places as the mega-malls and coffee palaces of Atlanta and Memphis. Even Beale Street makes more allusions to Las Vegas and Disney World than it does to the Delta and local culture.

Recently I rode along a stretch of county highway in the Delta that I had not been on in almost ten years. The Drew-Merigold Road winds its way along bayous and through fields in a circuitous route that the region's main thoroughfares like Highway 61 and 49 do not. Those legendary United States highways are more likely to follow true compass lines like the strictures of Township and Range boundaries while secondary roads follow, more often than not, the contours of the land and antecedent elements of the cultural landscape.

Roads like the Drew-Merigold Road also stay within sight of trees and groves giving the traveler the sense of being in the midst of an inhabited or bounded place while the United States highways are often in the middle of a stripped and barren landscape where there are lonesome trees at the edge of fields; trees that Laura, in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*, says appear pitiful compared to ones she draws. On the side roads one is more closed in. With this observation and experience comes an elusive impression. For me, I imagine a sense of place that implies memory, or the notion that this place has a recollection of habitation that eludes me along the four-lane United

States Highway 61. Moving in this landscape I am struck more by the seemingly flat land of the Delta than I am when the nearest tree line is in the haze of the horizon. The impact of seeing the land in snatches—around trees, behind buildings, in isolated fields, around sweeping curves in the road—gives me the sense that these places, this place, is connected by its flatness. In this setting, the scattered elements of community and ruralness exist in a landscape much different from other places in Mississippi, leaving me with the sense that this place is, indeed, different (Welty 1946).

Most of my informants say that they came back to the Delta, in part, because they enjoy the slower pace of life they believe exists here. Even those who claim to have significant problems with living in the region concede that it is quieter and more peaceful than the urban North or West. This aspect of return migration points out that there is something about the Delta that draws people into the region beyond family and home connections. Perhaps the Delta represents a quiet repose from the noise and furor found in America's great urban centers. If this is the case then one must ask why it is that the Great Black Migration continued for nearly sixty years. One answer may be that the city was always a difficult place for rural Southern black migrants but that they persevered as long as the city provided them a means to hope for a better future for them and their children. Since black return migration began in the early 1970s one ought to examine the urban political economy of that era for an answer to the question of why that was a time that migrants, and descendents of migrants, began to abandon their urban lives.

Postmodernity and the Delta

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey offers a Marxist argument for recent economic change that began in the early 1970s. Harvey points to the Arab Oil embargo of 1973, and its resultant recession, as a defining moment for American capitalism. He argues that this event forced American business to reassess its entire system of production. Increasingly, American corporations began looking toward greater flexibility in all aspects of production. One theme was that American businesses began to view labor in new ways. Up until this point, New World capitalism had honored an unwritten contract with workers that held that management would provide employment in perpetuity and workers would allow stockholders and executives to accumulate profits if workers believed that they were treated and compensated fairly. With the onset of near-depression in the 1970s, management decided to look elsewhere for cheaper and less powerful labor if they were to maintain the profit margins that stockholders had become accustomed to during the boom years of the 1950s and 1960s. For management, this meant a shift in production to the American South, and eventually, the developing world. Thus, black migrants and their families suffered one of historical geography's great ironies; the same jobs that drew blacks out of the South moved back South, or left the country altogether (Harvey 1989).

Harvey's argument in *The Condition of Postmodernity* that the United States economy took a fundamental turn in 1973 corresponds to the era that black return migration began. I believe that these two events are related. The two become interrelated when one notes Harvey's argument that American business leaders abandoned the long-standing social contract that had existed between worker and

management. The arrangement succeeded for most of the twentieth century as United States businesses became the leaders of the world in industrial output. Increasingly, late twentieth century capitalism became more flexible as management began massive layoffs and streamlining in addition to the relocation of manufacturing to low wage/weak union regions in the American South, and ultimately, the developing world. Labor unions lost power as management moved out of centers of labor power in the North. Membership in labor unions is at its lowest level in sixty years. The new American economy had an enormous impact on the African Americans who had participated in the Great Black Migration, a migration aimed at participation in the United States industrial economy (Harvey 1989).

This is a situation in which a group of people has been mistreated by modernism and its industrialist backbone. For many return migrants, the move to the Delta is a move away from an urban/industrial setting that they feel has failed to match the economic expectations that they or their ancestors hoped for. Urban conditions today are often unbearable in cities like Chicago and Detroit. Nicholas Lehman argues in *The Promised Land* that ghettos in the Urban North—especially housing projects like Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes and Cabrini Green—became some of the worst places to live in the world (Lemann 1991). For people accustomed to physical and social decay exemplified by gang violence, joblessness, crumbling buildings, scarce green space, drug addiction, and violence, the expansive fields of cotton, rice, and soybeans in the Mississippi Delta might become a beacon of rural peace. In relation to the apparent bucolic peace of the Delta, urban decay in the North has become a major push factor for potential return migrants to the South. The Delta is a place that appears to exhibit

Southern social warmth that serves as an antidote to the ugly postmodernity of the urban North. Most return migrants are acquainted with Delta hardship and poverty, but given an alternative to its Northern version, the Delta seems to be winning more and more converts.

Making similar observations in his day, Robert Penn Warren writes about William Faulkner's attitudes concerning modernization. Warren points out that Faulkner came of age before World War I, in the rural, pre-modern South. Thus, his novels look at the tension between these two worlds. This line of thinking that compares the pre-modern world with the modern one is related to my work as I consider modernity's role in driving blacks from the Delta and postmodernity's role in bringing them back. One reason blacks are returning to the Delta is that the urban North constitutes a hard life and migrants long for a peaceful rural place. In effect, modernism drove blacks from the Delta and its end is now pushing them back (Warren 1966).

Of course, the "modern" Delta is more mechanized than ever. Perhaps migrants have a conception of the Delta as a pre-modern and hospitable place when the actuality is a place that has little use for human labor and a returning black people looking for a new life. Modernism is now the national rule, and black return migrants want its most diluted form. If they equate urbanism with modernism then this is a premodern place as compared to Chicago. The reality is something quite different. The Delta is a modern place dressed up in a pre-modern culture.

Conclusion

Migration involves the notions of space and location and the people making spatial decisions. These decisions include ideas based on life experience and memory just as they rely on facts that can be drawn from formal and published documents. My interest is in the importance of the Mississippi Delta as a place. I draw a distinction between black return migration to the South's major urban areas and its deeply rural areas like the Mississippi Delta. As I have stated, most observers argue that blacks are returning to the South to enjoy its dynamic economy and because the region has made great strides in racial reconciliation. Although one might argue that the latter explanation applies to the Delta (certainly the Delta has a better racial climate than it did in the days before Civil Rights Movement) but examples of dynamic economic activity in the Delta are hard to find. Ultimately, black return migrants come home because it is a place that has meaning for them beyond economics and increasing racial harmony. Issues of economics and race may in fact be in the minds of return migrants as they consider returning to the region, but they are issues to overcome, not opportunities to enjoy.

Much of this chapter is devoted to an outline of the region's historical geography. This is necessary because one must consider how the Delta became a place that has been traditionally hostile to its black residents. Since much of the black experience in the Delta is related to the history of agricultural production, it is important to note how the system developed in the region. Central to this task is understanding the rise of the sharecropping economy since that system was central to how the lives of blacks, and to a lesser extent poor whites, lived in the Delta. As first generation

migrants look back on their lives in the Delta they are looking back to a time when sharecropping was in operation or to a time when it still held power in the memories and imaginations of people of the region. For those who are returning to their family homeplaces, the sharecropping economy may be unknown. The attitudes about the place and sharecropping, however, are still shaped by the system that these younger returnees never knew.

CHAPTER 4

COUNTING RETURN MIGRANTS AND FINDING MEANING IN THEIR STORIES: A DISCUSSION OF METHOD AND THE DATA

Black return migration began in the early 1970s and has resulted in millions of African Americans moving into the South. While large numbers of blacks continue to leave the South for a variety of reasons, the dominant flow of migrants has been into the South. This migration flow is a reversal of the seventy-year trend of African Americans leaving the region. This chapter looks at the numbers, geography, and demographics of this return migration to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.

The 1970s was a decade that this epic Great Black Migration began to reverse, as wave after wave of black Americans returned to the South, in what anthropologist Carol Stack has called the Great Return Migration. Recent observations in the popular and scholarly press has show that the return migration is complex and may include all facets of the non-Southern African American community. Likewise, all regions of the South are seeing an increase in the number of blacks who have a history outside the region. Many are returning to the homes of their childhood, while a generation or more separates other returnees from the South. Oftentimes, spouses or friends of linked migrants with weak or nonexistent ties to the South, are coming into the region because of relationships (or to restore relationships) with natives of the region.

Using PUMS Data to Count Return Migrants

Although black return migration data exit in Census Bureau files, it is in a format that must be extracted and manipulated in way that the researcher gets only what is needed. The data that contain information detailed enough to be of any use in

determining who is or is not a black return migrant to the Delta are held in a data set called the Public Use Micro Data Sample (PUMS). The data set is an extract from the 1990 PUMS and focuses on several social factors. Education, poverty status, state of birth, and state of residence in 1985 are included in the data extract. In addition, the extract looks at familial relationships among each member of a household in which there is a return migrant. The information is drawn from the census long form that is sent to about one in six homes nationally, and in higher numbers in rural areas like the Delta. The questionnaire asks dozens of detailed questions such as the age, income, and state of birth of every member of the household. Since this type of detailed data are private, names are not available to the researcher, although it is possible to view the socio-demographic characteristics of an individual household.

Data drawn from the 1990 Public Use Micro Data Sample can be formatted so that each household record is followed by information about each person living in the dwelling. Formatting can allow almost all of the long form data to be linked to a household and its residents. To keep the information anonymous, the sample is coded geographically to a group of counties, or parts of counties, containing not less than 100,000 people. These geographic subsets within the PUMS data are called Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAS). Beginning with the 1980 census, the data in the PUMS consisted of a large one-in-twenty sample of all the long forms from a region. When extracting the data from a PUMA one must multiply the PUMS sample by 20 to make an estimate of how many records might actually be in the PUMA. The data concerning black return migration were based on migration between 1985 and 1990. The long form asks the preparer to give the state of residence of each household member five years

prior to 1990. This information allows the researcher to determine who is a return migrant.

Two PUMAS cover the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta (Figure 14). The census region in the South Delta is wholly within the alluvial floodplain of the Delta and the northern census region, or PUMA, includes four counties that are partially outside the alluvial floodplain, thus it is not a Delta PUMA in the strictest sense of the term. The counties in question are Desoto, Tate, Panola, and Tallahatchie. I do not believe that including these Delta border counties detracts significantly from the data's accuracy. First, the additional non-Delta portions of counties are a relatively small part of the total sample. Second, demographic conditions in three of these counties are similar to those found in the core of the Delta. Tate, Panola, and Tallahatchie Counties each have a black majority population, just as each has a relatively high poverty rate. Desoto County, on the other hand is a regional anomaly. A portion of Desoto County is, in fact, in the Delta's alluvial floodplain, and thus has an economic and cultural history that resembles closely that of the core Delta counties. Sitting as it does, however, on the Tennessee border, it has increasingly been drawn into the urban sphere of Memphis, thus bringing economic development to the county. Thus, its medium family income is higher (36,285 dollars in 1998) and its black population percentage is lower (13.7 percent). The problems associated with including this PUMA, and thus this county, are outweighed by the advantages of including the other north Delta core counties included in the sample. Using 1997 population estimates, DeSoto County accounts for a significant, but not crippling, 24 percent of the total population of the total of both

PUMAS. When looking at the Northern PUMA alone, Desoto accounts for 43 percent of the total. The 43 percent figure is alarmingly high, but it does not justify excluding three of the core Delta counties. A final, and troubling, aspect of these PUMS data is that Leflore County belongs to another PUMA, in which it is the only core Delta county in a PUMS region including eight other counties, two of which are partially in the Delta. These data difficulties demonstrate once again the relative difficulty of relying on published data to measure the extent and significance of regional migration phenomena. Fortunately, the data correspond to the study area as closely as they do, and are clearly adequate to quantify a process that the most casual of field observations confirms.

The Census Bureau makes note of return migrants, but does so in such a way as to undercount the phenomenon. Its definition of the black return migrant is a black person who was born in the South, and who returns after living outside the region for an extended period. Based on this definition, bureau researchers use the long form sample found in the PUMS and flag black return migrants. As Stack and Cromartie showed in their 1989 study, this definition undercounts the total migration pool by missing those persons moving into the region who were not born in the South, but who have some familial connection to the region. These individuals may have spent periods of their lives visiting in the Delta. Oftentimes, these migrants are children who move into and out of the region for short periods. The researchers argue that those newcomers to the South who live in a household with a native of the region should be counted as return

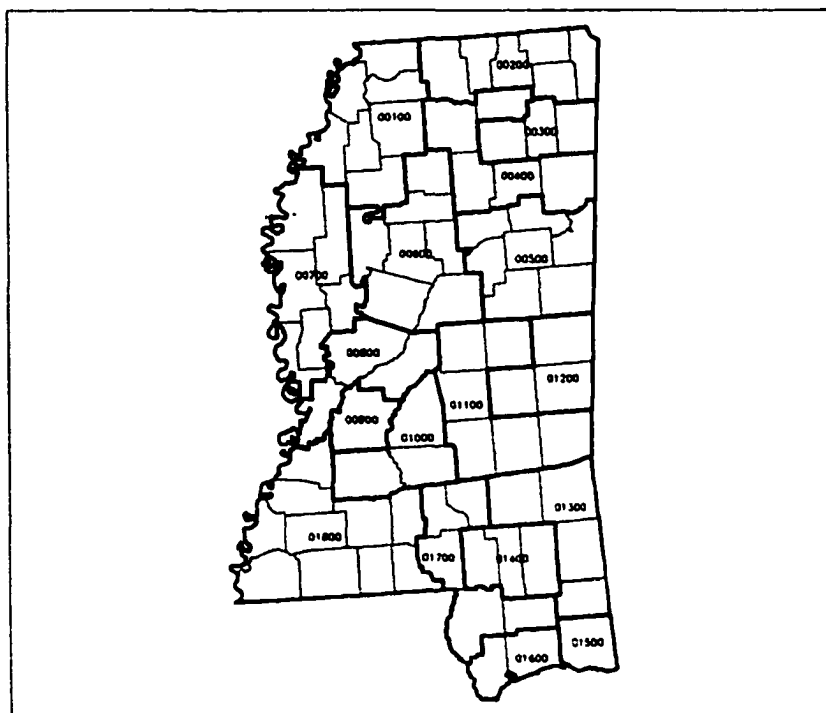


Figure 14. Mississippi 5 Percent Sample Public Use Micro Data Areas. The two PUMAS in the northwest part of the state, 00100 and 00700, constitute the Delta data areas (Bureau of the Census 1990).

migrants. They base this conclusion on Carol Stack's ethnographic fieldwork among return migrants in the Carolinas, and among her earlier informants in the urban Midwest

In her earlier work, *All Our Kin*, Stack makes an observation concerning the nature of the black family as it has faced its American ordeal in a way that is African, without being self consciously so. Through her ethnographic experience among African American migrant families in the Midwest, Stack came to understand that poor black families operate under a set of norms and rules that are distinctly different from those common among middle class white families. She focuses on the notion of domestic kinship networks. These networks are a complex coalition of family and friends who combine resources and labor to maintain economic and familial stability in an environment of extreme poverty. Swapping and trading of goods and services characterize this system, and participants keep a memory of favors and reciprocations with other members of the group. Goods and services may include gifts of food and clothes, but may also involve childcare or minor nursing of the elderly. One of my informants, Margaret Block, a recent return migrant from San Francisco, remembers that her mother would always keep a little extra cornmeal or beans to offer to people in their network who needed a little help. As she sits in the same house that her Great grandfather built, a house that she keeps in good repair and neat as a pin, she states flatly, "That's just how we lived."

Since return migrants are defined as individuals who lived recently outside the Delta, and who may live in the same household with a native of the state, it follows that these returnees are relying on others to help them make their way in the region. What cannot be assessed by these data is whether or not these returnees are members of a

domestic network in the Delta. This realization may lead us to note that many who are not considered by the data and definition to be returnees, may in fact be so. If, for example, the PUMS data show a couple, both of whom were born outside the South, living in the Delta in 1990, but who lived in Illinois in 1985, they would not be considered to be returnees. Ethnographic detail might reveal that the couple is part of an extended domestic network that has moved home to the Delta to be closer to that support infrastructure. They might even live in the same neighborhood, but the census data could never reveal that fact (Stack 1974).

In that study, which was based on data from the 1980 census, the researchers found that when using the Census Bureau definition, 42 percent of black migrants into the South were return migrants. Using their modified definition and data extraction method, they revised the figure to 69 percent. Even the higher statistic may be too small in that it misses return migrants born outside the region though connected by family, and who set up their own household upon returning—or arrive for the first time—to the South. Such a migrant might be living next door to his or her parent or grandparent, but since the non-native linked migrant is identified through household data, he or she would not show up in the census as someone with a familial connection to the region. These migrants are worth considering as one considers the validity of return migration figures, but they are impossible to detect other than through interviews. Recently I met a young African American man who moved from Detroit to Renova, Mississippi, to be near his mother, who is also a recent return migrant. Currently, he is living with his mother while his house is being built. He was born in Michigan. If he is

living in the new house ten years from now, he will appear to be an independent migrant, when in fact he moved into the Delta to join his family.

Quantifying Black Return Migration to the Delta, 1985-1990

Between 1985 and 1990, nearly three thousand black migrants returned to their homeplace in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. This migration figure combines data from the two PUMAS that constitute the Delta. As I mentioned above, the Northern PUMA includes all or parts of counties that are partially in the Delta or on its eastern border. This problem is due to the aforementioned fact that no PUMA may contain fewer than 100,000 people. By linking household members to various demographic attributes available in the PUMS data, several generalizations and observations can be made about black return migrants to the Yazoo- Mississippi Delta.

There was a significant migration of blacks into the Delta in years between 1985 and 1990. Based on the definition used by the Census Bureau, 66.67 percent of all blacks moving into the Delta in the five-year period were return migrants. By this the Bureau means that these movers were born in the region and were returning to their homes. Using the more expansive definition that I outlined earlier in the chapter, 87.3 percent of these movers were return migrants in that they joined households in which there lived a native of Mississippi. There is a mysterious statistic in those households in which there was at least one return migrant. The data show that 4,104 non-migrants lived in the total of all houses in which there was a return migrant (Table 4). By the logic that argues that many of these return migrants were joining existing households, these 4,104 residents are the familial or social link that has provided a home to the new returnees. What is noteworthy about these non-migrants is that 17.25 percent of them

were not born in the state of Mississippi yet did not live outside the state in 1985.

Likely, these individuals are linked return migrants who moved to the Delta more than five years before the census year and were still living in the home of a native.

Several demographic consistencies present a generalized picture of black return migration to the Mississippi Delta. Poverty tends to be a problem shared by many black returnees to the region. The Bureau of the Census defines poverty on a graduated scale according to family size, age, and number of dependent children under the age of thirteen. A family unit of four persons that has two dependent children, and a household income of 16,895 dollars is considered to be at the poverty level. A single parent supporting one child is considered impoverished if the household income is less than 11,483 dollars. The poverty level rises to 13,423 dollars if there are two children present in a household headed by a single adult.

Within the entire population of black return migrants, 58.18 percent live at or below the poverty level, a level lower than black Deltans as a whole. While the return migrants are somewhat better off than black Deltans on average, they are by no means wealthy. What is perhaps more shocking is the statistic that places 46.36 percent of black return migrants to the Delta at seventy-five percent of the poverty level, a level substantially higher than the national average of just over thirteen percent. Just over twenty percent of all returnees to the Delta survive crushing poverty—however precariously—at a mere one half of the poverty level, or for a family of four persons, less than 9,000 dollars a year. That a group of people live in such debilitating poverty is difficult to comprehend in this era of mammoth national economic growth. The 20 percent statistic is noteworthy in that the Census Bureau considers a county to be

Table 4. Weighted PUMS Data for Yazoo-Mississippi Delta PUMAS, 1985-1990

Description	Value
Total number of black return migrants to the Mississippi Delta, 1985-1990	2,979
Total number of non-migrants living in households in which there was a return migrant	4,104
Median age of linked return migrants	14
Median age of all black migrants to the Delta	24
Percent of all return migrants living at or below the poverty level	58.2
Percent of all Delta blacks living at or below the poverty level	64.24

defined as a persistent poverty county if that county has twenty percent of its population chronically at the poverty level. Though it is difficult to compare an entire county's population to a more specific population group such as black return migrants, it is striking that a sample such as this would so far exceed the definition for extreme poverty.

Education levels for black return migrants to the Delta are as grim as the economic picture. More than half of all returnees (53.18 percent) had less than a high school education, while almost one fourth (24.32 percent) had less than a ninth grade education. Initially, one might think that black return migrants are a disproportionately elderly population and therefore would be expected to have lower levels of education given social patterns of racial discrimination in decades past. The reality is that black return migrants to the Mississippi Delta are neither older nor younger than any other migration group would be expected to be. Classical migration theory and research holds that migrants tend to be young, usually averaging of twenty-five years of age. PUMS data show that returnees to the Delta fit this axiom and that 51 percent are twenty-five years old or younger. The age is even younger for linked migrants not born in Mississippi who were living with natives. For this linked group, 55 percent are younger than seventeen, and 63 percent are twenty-one years old or younger. Many assume that the return of blacks to the Delta is a migration of retirees, but the data show that only 5.5 percent of all black return migrants to the Delta are age 65 or older.

In another respect, black returnees to the Delta are different from the demographic sketch provided by migration theory. Delta returnees are disproportionately female: 52.6 percent are women, 47.4 percent are male. Migration

theory holds that international migrants are mainly young and male while migrants moving within a country are more likely to be family units. Even though domestic migrants are less likely to be males, it is still true that Delta return migrants are more female than classical migration theory would indicate.

Moving From Bad to Worse: Migration Streams of the Poor

Mark Nord (1998) of the United States Department of Agriculture has done some provocative studies concerning migration of the poor. His research tries to understand why there are regions in the United States that continue to lag economically behind the rest of the country. He juxtaposes his inquiry to accepted economic theory that states that regions of economic depravation move inevitably toward parity with wealthier regions as regions of labor surplus lose working age populations to regions of labor shortage. This thinking takes as a given that many of these regions of labor surplus have become so due to structural shifts in their political economy. In the case of the Yazoo Delta, human labor was supplanted by mechanization in the 1940s and 1950s, rendering most of an entire population without work. Many have argued that since the work was usually unfair and always arduous, it was best for this work to be eradicated; others argue that any work brings with it hope, and that hope is key to a meaningful life. The question for Nord is why have such places of chronic poverty and hopelessness resisted spatial equilibrium through migration that is predicted by economic theory.

Nord argues that there are different migrant streams for the poor and the non-poor in the United States. The theoretical starting point for his migration study is that the poor tend to be as mobile as the non-poor and that the poor are, in fact, likely to

move longer distances than their non-poor counterparts. The poor, he argues, tend to move from persistent poverty regions to other persistent poverty regions, or they move out of regions that are undergoing structural changes in the regional economy whereby that region is seeing dynamic growth in its economy and becoming a wealthier region. Conversely, the non-poor tend to leave poor regions in favor of wealthier regions or they move from one wealthy region to another. Cynical observers might blame the poor for making irrational decisions. Nord argues, however, that the opposing migration streams are more complex than casual observation reveals. First, the poor are driven to find low cost housing, which tends to be scarce in economically dynamic locales. Second, the poor are often less qualified for the high skill jobs associated with growing labor markets and are in search of low skill and entry level positions that are often readily available in poverty stricken regions. Third, many regions of chronic poverty—like the Mississippi Delta—exhibit patterns of social and familial linkages that bind former migrants to their former homeplaces. Nord speculates that different forms of return migration may be responsible for some of the separate migration streams that he detects in his research. Given the fact that black return migrants to the Mississippi Delta are much poorer than Americans in general, Nord's findings seem accurate.

Thus far in the chapter I have discussed the theoretical qualities of discerning black return migrants from the thousands of Americans who move from place to place between census years. This discussion, and the data they reveal, is central to understanding the population change that is going on the Delta. As I have argued previously, however, the numbers do not tell the story in a meaningful way. My central theme in understanding black return migration to the Mississippi Delta is to listen to

migrants themselves as they share their lives and stories with me in an ethnographic setting. Anthropologist Miles Richardson has spent his career at Louisiana State University writing about and employing the ethnographic method while teaching its inner workings to undergraduates and graduates. What follows is a discussion of his seminal work on the subject.

The Myth Teller

In 1973, anthropologist/ethnographer Miles Richardson was scheduled to spend a sabbatical semester in Costa Rica. He became ill and was unable to complete his stay in Central America, and instead spent his time writing a piece that had been on his mind for a long time. He wrote “Anthropologist: The Myth Teller” at a time in the history of anthropology when its scholars were searching for their academic place in a modernizing world whose traditional cultures were disappearing. It became fashionable in that era to question the role and validity of their basic project, a philosophical stance that continues today. Richardson’s piece was a sweeping account of the field of anthropology, the method of ethnography, and his own life as an ethnologist/ethnographer. Its message is central to what I am trying to do in this dissertation.

The article looks first at anthropologists and ethnographers of the early twentieth century who began traveling in European and American colonies to write about disappearing traditional cultures. Stanislaw Malinowski stands as the quintessential ethnographer of his day. He lived among the people of the Trobriand Islands in the South Pacific and wrote a classic ethnography of his experience there. Richardson includes a passage from Malinowski’s work in which the earlier ethnologist ventures

out one morning and moves among the villagers as they begin the day's activities. Moalinowski writes that he had become a kind of nuisance in the village and that the villagers seemed to ignore him as he intruded on their work and space as an observer. Against this historical and romantic backdrop, Richardson includes a passage from his own dissertation work that he conducted in the Colombian town of San Pedros in the early 1960s. His experience is much less romantic as his morning walk through the town is lonely; the men were off working and the women were in their houses, behind closed doors. His one encounter that morning is with a man who mutters angrily as Richardson's dog splashes through a community water supply. In this contrast, the article evokes a sense of disillusionment resulting from the dehumanizing and antisocial effects of modern life. The author's stance is self-mocking, and almost absurd, when pitted against the Malinowskian ideal, but leads out of despair when he finds safe harbor in academic humanism. Richardson strips away the romanticism, that indeed may have drawn him to the field, and is left with the inspiration that there still are stories to tell, regardless of the condition one finds the informant village. He is not oblivious to the relations of power that separate informant and ethnographer, nor does he exempt himself from introspection concerning the ethics and responsibilities that his project implies.

One theme in the article that is important to this dissertation is the exploration that Richardson gives to the relationships of power between the informant and the ethnographer. As a white man studying among blacks in the Mississippi Delta, I must be cautious about how I interact in with informants. Whites in the Delta have held a position of near absolute power for nearly as long as the region has been open to

European-style agriculture. Although I am not connected to agriculture, nor does my family have roots in the region, I must assume that my whiteness brings with it a degree of power and that it engenders a degree of suspicion on the part of potential informants.

My first encounter with Dorothy Mae Scott illustrates the point. It was the winter of 1998 and I had learned of Mrs. Scott's migration story from a friend. I followed my directions to Mrs. Scott's home in rural Sunflower County and found myself sitting in my car in the dirt and mud driveway of her house, not knowing what to do. Her dog sat on the concrete stairs of the house and barked. He moved over to the car with a measured wariness that caused me to wonder whether or not he might attack me. I was too frightened to get out of my car and did not see anyone. I saw Mrs. Scott's old pick up truck so I knew she was home. As the minutes passed I realized that she did not know I was there. After coming this far I was not going to leave, nor was I ready to be bitten by a protective yard dog. I considered blowing my horn to alert her of my presence, yet I knew that such an action was imbued with powerful racial and historical implications. Folklore in the Delta concerning the sharecropping system is full of references of white landowners driving their cars up to the front of their tenant's shacks and honking their car horn to get someone to come out to the car, as if they were carhops at some rural drive-in. Landowners showed their disrespect by refusing to knock on the resident's door. As an elderly woman of the Delta, I knew that Mrs. Scott would recognize the implications of my act, and that such an affront could seriously chill any ethnographic relationship I hoped to earn with her. She responded positively to my presence, and within minutes, we were off to Ruleville in my car to see about an overdue water bill. Such a quandary potentially awaits the white ethnographer studying

black culture in the Deep South. Perhaps I was lucky to recognize the situation, but what of similar situations that I do not perceive?

One of the ironic aspects of this method is that it reverses the traditional notions of researcher and subject. In fact, ethnographers do not usually consider their informants to be subjects at all; ethnographers do not conduct scientific experiments as a way of relating to their informants. The scientist places a subject in a laboratory (whether rat, human, or chemical) and manipulates the research environment in a way that tests a hypothesis. Ethnographers, on the other hand, go into the field and submerge themselves in the informant's environment and let the informant shape the research experience. What results, hopefully, is a situation where the researcher becomes the student, and the informant the teacher. In my field experience I have always expressed this to my informants by telling them that I have come to learn from them. I usually mention that I have read many things about black return migration, but that I want to learn from actual migrants what the story is all about; I tell them that I want *them* to teach *me*. This situation does not apply to every informant in the dissertation. In many cases I conducted single interviews with migrants. In some cases, I happened to meet black return migrants in the course of daily life. For example, I met one man while waiting in a doctor's office who had returned to the Delta from St. Louis, and in another case I met a family in the Memphis airport as they said goodbye to a relative at the gate. In other cases, I write about a more traditional ethnographic experience in which I spent many hours in many different settings with the informant.

Richardson's *The Myth Teller* conveys a degree of self-analysis and criticism that is as illuminating as it is unnerving. He draws contrasts between the motivations of

ethnographers of the nineteenth century and of ethnographers today. He questions whether or not ethnographers are seeking forgiveness from their informants, who are usually members of a subjugated class. If, as is often the case, the researcher is white and the informant is some other shade of ethnicity, the ethnographer is cast in the role of emissary from the ruling elite. Why would a member of a powerful ethnic group do such a thing? When one takes the axiomatic philosophy of cultural relativism (a philosophical point of view that takes cultures as they come, without prejudging them) as a given, then one hopes the ethnographer takes with him a political point of view that is, at least, open to the notion that the ruling group has some advantages that have nothing to do with merit. Richardson wonders whether or not these researchers are attempting to bring a story and understanding of their informants to the unenlightened elite in order to give that elite a view of their subservients that might lead to better treatment and opportunity. This relationship might be seen in the wealthy ethnographer of the nineteenth century traveling to Africa or the radical white graduate student finding his or her way through the inner workings of an urban Hispanic community. Richardson makes a sobering observation when he writes, "Insecure in themselves, perhaps they find insecure people to study (Richardson 1990, 22)."

Matrifocality and Black Return Migration to the Mississippi Delta

The family living arrangements of black returnees to the Mississippi Delta is central to much of linked migration to the region. Since the definition of a return migrant that I use here includes the notion that a return migrant may be someone who lives in a household with someone who never left the South, I must examine the structural qualities of black households in the Delta. Anthropologist Carol Stack has

done wonderful ethnographic work that questions popularly held assumptions about the black household. She points out the fallacy of the nineteenth century notion of matriarchy that is assumed by many to be the standard domestic arrangement in black households. A more recent model of the black household is the notion of matrifocality, a somewhat elusive term that implies residential complexity and a strong female presence, without implying female domination. Stack argues, however, that neither matrilinealism nor matrifocality addresses accurately the realities of black domestic life. Stack's work, in this case, concerns life in the urban North thirty years ago, but I believe it can be applied to rural life in the South today. Her point is that black living arrangements have more to do with the practical matters of finding strategies for living within an economic system that is often changing and difficult for the poor and poorly educated individuals in her study. Her most basic observation is that with most life changing events and crises come changes in residential location and household structure. Although females do play an important role in dealing with these changes, specifically when childcare decisions are concerned, the decision is more about finding a solution to economic and domestic needs than the relative power and status of women in the black family. Stack argues that it usually the sibling unit that is at the center of these migration and domestic decisions.

As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, PUMS data can provide just this type of detailed household data. PUMS data include sketches of actual households drawn from census long forms. They are constructed in a way that makes it possible to infer certain migration and familial stories. In some cases, it is impossible to determine whether or not certain individuals in a household are return migrants or not, but in other cases such

information is easy to discern. The first column in the PUMS tables below indicates the migration status of the individual represented in that row. A household resident listed as a stayer is one who did not live outside Mississippi in 1985. In fact, that person may have lived outside Mississippi six or more years before the census year of 1990, but it is impossible to tell from the available data. A returnee is, as has been mention in this and other chapters, a person living the household with a native of the region. A non-returnee would be an individual living in the region with no observable connection to the Delta. Such a person may or may not be a return migrant in terms of their relation to the region, but the data will not reveal such rich information. There are African Americans who come to the Delta for work in some of the region's businesses, but others born outside the region may be joining a homeplace, but live in their own residence. Other information in the tables includes the individual's birth state, familial role in the household, age, sex, highest level of education, and poverty level. The poverty figures are given as percentages of the poverty level, so for example, a household listed as 100 percent earns enough money to place them precisely at the poverty level. A household showing 200 percent poverty earns twice the poverty amount, while a household showing 50 percent earns half the poverty income. Table 5, shown below, is the first of several examples of household familial structures from the Delta sample that illustrate the household complexity found among Delta African Americans:

Table 5. Household Structure of Black Return Migration, Household 1

Migration Status	State 1985	Birth Place	Relation	Age	Sex	Year School	Poverty
Ret.	IN	AR	Head	39	Male	College	362
Ret.	IN	IN	Spouse	37	Female	HS grad	362

Table 5 is a case in which it is impossible to tell whether or not the household constitutes a return migrant household. In fact, the household is not considered to be a return migrant household by the Census Bureau or by the Cromartie/Stack definition. The household consists of a married couple who moved from Indiana to Mississippi between 1985 and 1990. The woman in this household is a native of the Midwest, but the husband is a native of Arkansas. One possible scenario is that the man was born in Arkansas but grew up in Mississippi. The Arkansas Delta and the Mississippi Delta are similar regions and both have a long history of operating as a unified entity. For example, Mississippi planter Will Dockery owned land in both states, and blues musician Robert Nighthawk used to perform on KFFA at noon, in Helena, Arkansas, and later, catch the ferry to the Mississippi side for evening jukes. Regarding the couple in the PUMS data, it is possible that the man's parents were living on a plantation in the Arkansas Delta for a short time and later made a life in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. The man, who met and married his wife while living in Indiana, may have returned to the Delta to care for his aging parents. Ultimately, it is impossible to know. It is, however, unlikely that such a couple would move to the Mississippi Delta without some social linkage to the place. What is curious is the relatively high income (362% of the poverty level) enjoyed by the household.

Table 6. Household Structure of Black Return Migration, Household 2

Migration Status	State 1985	Birth Place	Relation	Age	Sex	Year School	Poverty
Ret.	MI	MS	Head	38	Male	<HS	82%
Ret.	MS	WA	Child	11	Male	<9th	82%

Table 6 presents a return migrant household that is unusual in its family history. Perhaps there are countless stories that might explain the data found in the table, and

why the child was born in Washington. It might be the case that the father moved to Washington State as a young man to look for work, or was stationed there in the military. While there, he was involved with a woman, that he might or might not have married, and conceived the male child listed in the Mississippi household. Perhaps there was marital discord, or some type of separation between him and the mother, and the adult male left for Michigan in search of work. For some reason, he was unable (or unwilling) to take his son with him and the child was sent to live with family—perhaps the mother—in Mississippi. Eventually he returned to Mississippi where he resumed his parental role as father, without the assistant (at least cohabitation) of the mother. Regardless of the specifics of the family story, there is a family history in Mississippi, and that life has been called upon for some reason.

Table 7. Household Structure of Black Return Migration, Household 3

Migration Status	State 1985	Birth Place	Relation	Age	Sex	Year School	Poverty
Stayer	MS	MS	Head	34	Female	HS Grad	199%
Stayer	MS	MS	Child	16	Female	<HS	199%
Ret.	MI	MS	Partner	29	Male	HS Grd	22%

Table 7 is as mysterious as the previous two. It is likely a good example of the open lines of travel and communication that link the Delta with urban regions in the North. Family reunions and extended visits are a common theme in the lives of black Deltans, and most blacks in the Delta have family and friend in the urban north. In some ways, places like Chicago are extra-Southern locations; some say that Chicago is the largest city in North Mississippi! In table 7 a migrant has joined an existing household composed of a mother and her teenage daughter. The migrant is a black man who was born in Mississippi, but who lived in Michigan prior to his return to the South.

Perhaps the man and woman became acquainted when one or the other visited family or friends in either location. One can only wonder why the man barely is employed and earns an income that is a mere 22 percent of the poverty level. Perhaps they were involved before the man moved out of the state, or perhaps they met sometime after 1985, after he had moved back to Mississippi. In any event, there is a residential situation in which native Mississippi stayers share a household with a person who has lived outside the region.

Table 8. Household Structure of Black Return Migration, Household 4

Migration Status	State 1985	Birth Place	Relation	Age	Sex	Year School	Poverty
Stayer	MS	MS	Head	36	Male	College	88%
Ret.	WI	MS	Spouse	34	Female	HS Grad	88%
Ret.	WI	WI	Child	15	Female	<HS	88%
Ret.	WI	MS	Child	10	Male	<9th	88%
Ret.		IL	Child	5	Male	<9th	88%

Table 8 presents a case that emphasizes the fluid nature of African American family structure and household living strategies. Like most of these PUMS tables, one cannot say with certainty what is going on here, except that the mother has borne the burden of caring for these children the longest. Both parents were born in Mississippi, but the woman at least, has made frequent relocations between Mississippi, Wisconsin, and Illinois. The couple's oldest child was born in Wisconsin, fifteen years before the census year. The young family returned to Mississippi, where the second child, a boy, was born. Apparently, the woman was in Illinois a little more than five years before the youngest child was born, after which, the family moved back to Wisconsin. The father is listed as living in Mississippi five years prior to the census year, but it is impossible to know whether or not he made the original move out of Mississippi with his wife or

not. The data show, nevertheless, that he was living in the South while his family lived in Illinois. After a short time, the family was reunited under the same roof in the Delta. This story (as much as one can gather from PUMS data) is characteristic of the peripatetic lifestyle and changing residential strategies common among migrant families.

What Makes a Household a Home?

These examples are in keeping with what ethnographers and others have said about the black American family in the twentieth century. Carol Stack argues in many of her writings that traditional notions of household types are insufficient to describe black family patterns. Neither the nuclear family model nor matrilinealism adequately describe black reality. She argues in *All Our Kin* that black families linked to urban America are likely to attempt a wide variety of strategies that can bring to them a modicum of domestic success. In many cases these arrangements involve frequent moves and an ever-changing cast of characters that make a home. Brother, sisters, friends, and family may all have a part to play in building a household. Such a humanistic view of residential living strategies is suited to interpreting households that do not fit standard paradigms of family living.

In the 1950s, matrifocality became popular among anthropologists as a way to look at family. The term was intended to replace the aging concepts that anthropologists believed had become limited in their ability to make sense out of the families that they encountered in the field. Matriarchy, like matrifocality, sees family units as being based on the importance of women, whether the unit is one of female-dominated leadership or female-based lineage. Stack argues that both are degrees of the

same understanding, and that neither does a good job in explaining the modern black family. Stack's work in this area was published before she began her fieldwork in Carolina among black return migrants, and thus is interested in black families in the urban North.

My dissertation deals with returnees, yet I believe that her concept concerning black families is useful in reaching an understanding of family structure among return migrant family units in the Delta. Tables 5 through 7 display qualities (explicitly or implicitly) that grow out of Stack's ideas. In Table 7 an adult male has joined an existing household in which he is not the primary wage earner. There is no way to tell whether or not he is exerting any supervision or parenting over the teenage girl in the household, but it is hard to believe that his presence is not having some impact on the young person's view of herself, her home, and her place in the world. Table 6 differs from the concepts of matriarchy and matrilinealism since the household consists of a man and his young son. Further, the boy was not living under the same roof as the father prior to five years of the census, causing one to question what type of living strategy was in use at the time. Finally, Table 8 presents a peripatetic family unit that has seen a great range of living arrangements and geographies in the recent past. All of these indicate that the black return migrant household unit can be a complex and fluid living environment. From the standpoint of method, ethnography is well suited to untangling the narratives that give meaning and depth to the countless stories of black return migration to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.

CHAPTER 5

MY HOME IS IN THE DELTA: THE INFORMANTS

Although the presence of black return migration is in evidence everywhere in the Mississippi Delta, people I talk to about the subject seem to be surprised and fascinated to hear of its existence. Many times, I have spoken with African Americans about the return migration and have asked if anyone in their family or circle of friends lives “up North,” or if any such relative has considered moving back. Oftentimes, the response is that, no, no one in the family has made such a move. Then, later in the conversation, I hear a clue of an aunt or cousin who once lived in Chicago, but now lives in the Delta. As I exclaim, “Yes, that is what I mean,” I receive a blank stare and an eventual knowing nod as my query finally comes into focus. “Yea, there is my auntie, who used to live in Milwaukee.” Have I asked questions in a confusing manner? Am I prying into affairs that are too personal, thus eliciting an evasive response, or is the return migration of blacks to the Delta such a commonplace pattern of temporary and peripatetic black residence in the Deep South and the industrial Midwest, that the subject lurks somewhere in one’s taken-for-granted understanding, so as to be scarcely noticeable? My impression is that the answer lies somewhere among these possibilities.

The reality is that black return migration to the Mississippi Delta is pervasive and easily observable. For example, the man who fixed a flat on my car today returned from Detroit ten years ago, but still has a guarded manner about him that makes it difficult to talk to him. In fact, I spoke with him a few weeks before, in the same damp garage, about his decision to move home and his desire to leave again. At that time, I

asked him if he ever thought about moving back to Detroit. I had scarcely asked the question before he answered in a rapid, near musical way, "*Everyday*." African Americans in the Delta have a way of saying "everyday" in a lyrical, somewhat weary, manner that places emphasis on the word every. The word "every" becomes, "aaavery" and the tone lowers to indicate the power of long suffering. When I called our previous conversation to his attention he did not seem surprised, nor did he seem to have forgotten our earlier talk. In fact, he asked how my "book" was coming along.

I did not seek this man out. I merely arrived at Bolivar Tire Company one day to get an inspection sticker on my car, and within a few minutes of chatting, I learned that two men working in the garage were return migrants from Michigan; they had not known one another previously. Every African American seems to know someone who has made such a move, or is considering such a move. One man in his fifties told me simply, "Yea, everybody comin' home."

One of the curious aspects of black return migration to the Delta is the basic tension that exists in the realization that the Delta historically has been a place for African Americans to escape. Given that the Delta has become a place for thousands of blacks to reclaim, one has to wonder, what is it that constitutes home for these people. How can they conceive of a place like the Delta as a refuge? Perhaps the answer lies in another realization, the realization that America has never really opened her arms to blacks anywhere. The Promised Land that Chicago and such places purported to be, became, in the end, unlivable and unwelcoming. All that remained was home and family, the Delta. If one is to be unwanted, one may as well be unwanted in a familiar place, surrounded by the support an extended family.

Margaret Block

Margaret is tough. I first met Margaret at a racial reconciliation meeting held in the presentation room of the Bolivar County Public Library. Jennifer Welty, a woman in her early forties with long dark hair streaked with gray and prone to wearing oversized dresses and dangling scarves, led the meeting. The meetings were a part of a project she was working on as a part of her master's degree in community development at the local college. Jennifer has a soft voice, a voice that has a rasped edge caused by tobacco smoke, and maybe whiskey, and greets you in a kind of intensely personal way that implies a deeper friendship than actually exists. Somewhere in the conversation of the meeting (there were perhaps ten people present) it came up that Margaret had lived for many years in San Francisco. Jennifer was thrilled to hear this because she too had once lived in California. Jennifer gushed, "Oh it was so wonderful out there. The people just seemed to accept other people for who they were and not because of their race. We need that kind of attitude here in the Delta!" Margaret just looked at her. After a lingering pause Margaret said, "I don't know what part of California you are talking about, but it ain't the California I know." Margaret's comment seemed more an observation than an attack. To be sure, it was a strenuous observation, but Margaret is not one to make personal attacks.

Margaret Block was born January 7, 1942, in Cleveland, Mississippi. She was born into a family that was middle class by Delta standards for blacks in those days. Her father had steady work at the compress and her mother performed domestic work for a Judge Greene and his wife. Although the white community of Cleveland did not know it at the time, Judge Greene and his wife actively supported the cause of black

legal equality. Margaret is named for the judge's wife. Margaret's great-grandfather worked for the Illinois Central Railroad, and they owned their own house and a little bit of land along the tracks on the south side of town, or "the low end," as Clevelanders still refer to the area. She says that her great-grandfather had sold much of his land to the railroad when they came in and laid their tracks through the emerging settlement. Margaret loves to talk and to tell stories and she says that her great-grandfather's name was Boat Deggins. She says that he was called "Boat" because he was born on a slave ship in the middle passage. Margaret is well educated. Whether or not her great-grandfather actually was a slave is an open question. Nevertheless, the telling of the story is characteristic of Margaret's personality. She is acutely aware of being a black woman, an African American. In fact, Margaret was a field worker for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the difficult years of the early 1960s.

Ms. Block began to think about racial justice as a young girl. She went to all-black schools as a child and remembers that they always had to use textbooks that had been cast off by the white children. She remembers being about nine or ten years old when it occurred to her that their books were old ones used by the white children, who had gotten new books. In the torn and tattered books, she remembers seeing the word "nigger" scrawled across the pages. "I said to myself right then that this was gonna' stop when I got grown," recalls Margaret. Such recognition of racial injustice would not have been something unusual to young Margaret. As a child in the late 1940s, Margaret's mother, Alma, would drag her and her older brother, Sam, to country church meetings where they would listen to Amzie Moore talk about the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "I didn't know what they was doing. They'd

tell us we'd be goin' to church, and we'd go way out in the country." Margaret recalls that her mother would tell her not to repeat to others what actually went on at those meetings in the country, and she remembers that while in the meetings they would always have Bibles with them so that if a sheriff's deputy or some other threatening person came along, they could claim that it was, in fact, a religious meeting. Amzie Moore was a World War II veteran who lived near the Blocks, on Chrisman Street. On returning from fighting in Italy, Moore was not content to sit by and see his rights as an American be trampled upon, not after risking his life fighting to defeat fascism. He was prepared to fight fascism in his own land. With a secure position at the Cleveland Post Office, he felt safe to operate his own business on the side, and to be openly involved in voting rights education and to work actively for social change. It is safe to say that Amzie Moore was the bedrock of civil rights activity in the Central Delta. Over the years he received such leaders as Andrew Young, Robert Kennedy, Robert Moses, and Stokely Carmichael. He was Margaret's mentor.

Sam Block, Margaret's older brother, was recruited into SNCC by Amzie Moore and Robert Moses. When SNCC moved its headquarters from Atlanta to the Delta in the early 1960s, Robert Moses, a major figure in the organization, came to Amzie Moore. Moore had been an organizer in the NAACP since the late 1940s or 1950s. As a visible member of the Cleveland and Bolivar County community, Moore had a firm grip on who could be trusted and counted on to be effective workers in SNCC. As many scholars of the Civil Rights Movement have noted, SNCC tended to be a younger, and more radical, group. SNCC constantly struggled with the older, more conservative, members of NAACP, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Sam's life and work has gained deserved recognition in recent years. In his fine volume on the Mississippi Civil Rights movement, *Local People*, John Dittmer devotes an entire chapter to Sam Block's work with SNCC in Greenwood. Sam was nearly fearless in those early days of the Mississippi movement as he entered Greenwood with little more than a few dollars in his pocket. He walked down the middle of the street in black neighborhoods only to see doors slammed and shutters drawn at his passing. He and his coworker Willie Peacock escaped one assassination attempt by climbing out the window and sliding down a television antenna pole. Margaret states flatly, "He was the baddest nigger in the state of Mississippi." When he died in the summer of 2000, many of his former friends in the movement gathered in Cleveland, Mississippi, to mourn and honor a man that Margaret describes as a warrior. During the service they played a selection featuring Sam from a Smithsonian Folkways collection of Mississippi Freedom songs.

Shortly after he became committed to SNCC, Sam recruited his younger sister into the movement. Margaret did not cut the figure of a fearless civil rights worker in the early 1960s; she claims that she weighed around one hundred pounds in those days. Like her brother, Margaret has haunting, almost hungry, eyes. Her eyes are not set deep, but they appear to be, since unusually dark rings surround them. Although she is not a large woman she has a deep voice. Her speech is scattered with the phrases and quips of a hip generation of African Americans that came of age in the 1960s. Phrases like, "I'm just chillin'" show up in her conversations with ease. There is a sense of anger about her personality that is perfectly reasonable given her life experiences and her history as a front line worker for civil rights, but she is also quick to laugh and has a

palpable sweetness about her. At Christmas, she surprised my children with gifts, and never fails to ask how they are doing.

One of Margaret's first assignments for SNCC was to go into Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, to educate rural blacks there about voter registration. She recalls that Stokely Carmichael drove her west from Cleveland to Charleston, on the edge of the Delta in the loess hills. One afternoon I drove Margaret to Tallahatchie County to visit with some of her old friends there, friends she enlisted in her civil rights work. On that trip she talked about the old white Plymouth Valliant that Stokely drove that day. Congressman Don Edwards of California donated the car to SNCC. She recalled how Carmichael had had to double back on a dirt road to lose the "rednecks" that were following them. "They knew that Valliant," Margaret says of Delta law enforcement. I may have been driving a little fast that day, because Margaret said, "You remind me of Stokely driving this way!" At one point we passed a large pick-up truck that was parked on the gravel shoulder. The driver, who I took to be a farmer given the tall radio antenna bolted to the truck's roof and tool boxes in the bed, fell in behind us after we passed, and followed us for several miles until he took a side road, and fell from sight. All the time that the truck was following us, Margaret was visibly uneasy. She said, "I must be havin' a flashback or something. Back in the day, there ain't no way you would have kept on driving by that truck. No indeed. You would have gone the other way or something"

Tallahatchie County, Mississippi is one of those counties that is half in the Delta and half out. Charleston, the county seat, is just to the east of the loess bluffs, and is an isolated town that is graciously beautiful. It has a quality of timelessness and calm that

is nearly unreal, or unnerving. It's beauty was noticed by Hollywood in the 1960s when it served as the set of a Steve McQueen film based on the William Faulkner novel, *The Reivers*.

Margaret's contact person in Charleston was Emma Keagler. Mrs. Keagler was the wife of one of the local morticians, an occupation that probably would have placed her family in the middle class. Amzie Moore had referred Mrs. Keagler to SNCC. While Margaret was in Charleston she was largely unsuccessful in finding people willing to risk the loss of their job or their bodily safety to register to vote. "People just slammed doors in my face." Before long, a friend of Mrs. Keagler's heard that local whites, perhaps the Ku Klux Klan, had plans to take what steps were necessary to drive Margaret from town, or to stop her activities. Margaret would not have been the first activist killed in the line of duty, and everyone knew it. Mrs. Keagler hustled Margaret out to a place she owned in the country and hid her in what Margaret now describes as a cave. Recalling the event today, Margaret remembers experiencing feelings of being a slave fugitive on the Underground Railroad. While Margaret hid in fear, Mrs. Keagler set out to find a more permanent safe haven for the young activist. After contacting SNCC personnel in Cleveland, Margaret was transferred to West Tallahatchie County (West Tallahatchie County is in the alluvial floodplain of the Delta), to live with the Brewer's. Margaret still visits the Brewers.

The Brewer family lives in a rural community in West Tallahatchie County that was organized by Roosevelt's Resettlement Administration during the New Deal. It was one of many settlements established throughout rural America in the wake of Depression era poverty and farm failures. Usually the government would buy large

parcels of land from defunct plantations or farms and recruit sharecroppers and struggling farmers to work small (usually forty or fifty acres) plots in the project. Oftentimes, the projects included such communal facilities as canneries, cotton gins, schools, and parks. Project participants bought the land, livestock, house, and farm implements at federally subsidized rates whose payments were stretched out over many years. If in some years, the farmer was short on cash, they had the option of paying the government with a portion of their crop, thereby making them sharecropper to the federal government. Perhaps the Brewers, as members of a federal resettlement program, were free and independent from whites and the local power establishment.

When I met Essie Mae Brewer in the summer of 2000, she was on the losing end of a fierce battle with cancer. She had undergone a double mastectomy and had lost her hair due to chemotherapy. On the day I met her, she wore a fine black wig that told me more about her sense of dignity than it corrected any blemish that she might have felt her loss of hair had inflicted on her appearance. Essie Mae was delighted to see Margaret, and it was not long before she put on a pot of field peas and heated some cornbread she had made the day before. She lives in a new trailer home that is immaculately clean and is set to the back and right of her old wood framed family homeplace. Her daughter, who recently returned from the urban Midwest, lives in the old homeplace.

Essie Mae's house is off the main road, a county black top, and sits at the end of a gravel lane. A few feet before the lane reaches Mrs. Brewer's house, it takes a hard left hand turn, and then cuts back right so that the lane continues in its original compass bearing. The road follows the banks of a bayou and passes a number of other homes, all

of which are owned by Brewer family members. Margaret Block and Jessie Mae Brewer, Essie Mae's late mother, came together in the days after Margaret's flight from Charleston. Essie Mae does not remember how SNCC organizers brought Margaret to her home, but she does mention that she and her family were quite close to Amzie Moore. She recalls that on many occasions they would make the trip over to Cleveland—a distance of some thirty miles as the crow flies, but since roads in the Delta tend to follow township and range lines, much farther—to meet with Moore or to attend a NAACP gathering. Amzie Moore was doubtless the person who knew that the Brewers would take in the young civil rights worker.

Watching Margaret interact with Essie Mae gave me a new perspective on her character. In relation to the Brewers, Margaret is a city girl. All of the family members that I met that day spoke with her and reminisced with her in the amused way that country people view city people. They laughed about the time that Margaret had tried to retrieve water from the well out back. Margaret did not know that a pump-style well must be primed before one attempts to pump water, and as they remembered the image of Margaret struggling to pump water from an unprimed well, they roared with laughter. They also recalled the time that Margaret had tried to catch a chicken for an upcoming meal, and they could not contain their giggles at the memory of that "town girl" from Cleveland stumbling around the yard. The family glowed in Margaret's presence and it was clear that she meant a great deal to them. At one point Essie Mae flattered me to the point of embarrassment when she commented to Margaret, while speaking of me.

Don't he remind you of—what was his name?— Miles, that white boy that worked with you all. He would come in my house and say, 'Momma, I am wore out. I been driving since I don't know when. I just need to sleep.' Then he'd

lay down on that bed back yonder and sleep for hours. Then he wake up hungry!

At that, the two women would laugh and their sight would turn inward, and I hurt inside because I was so honored to be a part of this scene. I seemed to forget myself and wonder how it is that I came to be here in this place, sharing food and stories with such brave, yet tender, people.

Essie Mae's mother, Jessie Mae, was a strong woman. One of Margaret's favorite stories of her days in SNCC is when she first explained to the elder Mrs. Brewer what the meaning of the acronym "Snick" stood for. Margaret says she told her that it stood for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. Margaret says that Jessie Mae gave her a questioning look and asked her, "Non-violent?" Margaret answered her, "Yes ma'am." As Mrs. Brewer walked across the room to take a rifle down off of the wall she said, "Non-violent—shit!" drawing the word shit out so that it sounded like, "sheeeit." Margaret remembers that they would go out every morning and take target practice at the edge of the field. That afternoon, she pointed the spot out to me. There was still a wood plank fence at the edge of the field where they would stand to prepare themselves for the race war that never came. Only once did they point their weapons in anger.

One night the Brewers and Margaret noticed a truck moving slowly down the gravel road toward the house. They realized quickly that it was a group of whites and that it might mean trouble, so they grabbed their rifles and headed out across the field, to the left of the road and the oncoming truck. As they slowed to a stop in front of the house, Eugene and Moses Brewer, and Margaret, circled around behind the truck and made their presence known. Moses Brewer, Essie Mae's older brother, told me flatly,

“I thought somebody was going to die that night.” The whites backed down and there was no violence. They never returned (Figure 15).

Margaret left the Delta in 1966. She had worked long and hard in a position that was not only stressful, but dangerous. The deaths of Cheney, Goodman, and Shwerner in Neshoba County reveal the lengths that the white establishment would go to in order to stop social change in Mississippi. While working in Tallahatchie County, Margaret, in fact, had to go to Glendora, Mississippi every night to call her SNCC colleagues so that they would know that she was safe. This work took its emotional toll on Margaret, and by 1966, Margaret says, “My nerves was real bad at that time, after getting’ shot at and going through all of that stuff.” Her situation was similar to Annie Moody’s, author of *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, a SNCC field worker in southwest Mississippi.

Moody also dealt with bouts of depression and mental anguish that probably were related to her stressful civil rights activities. Historian John Dittmer, a white professor who taught at Tougaloo College near Jackson in the 1960s, has written about a group of medical doctors who served veterans of the Mississippi Movement. Of these doctors, Margaret states, “They saved our lives.” It is difficult to believe that there are not more stories of exhaustion and emotional trauma among civil rights workers in those days of intense struggle. As with Margaret, these were mostly young people of deep sensitivity risking their lives for what they believed to be right and true. Margaret remembers that her mother became concerned that she had put off her college education for far too long and that it was time for her get out of the Movement and devote herself to personal development. She says of her decision to leave Mississippi for her education, “I decided I better go to school so I could come back and really mess ‘em up down here.”

Her decision to go to school came one year after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, and two years after his signing of the Civil Rights Act. Considering that SNCC's work in the Delta was primarily dedicated to voting rights education, their struggle was victorious. What do members of a social struggle do when their battle is won? In the case of SNCC, the organization entered a period marked by internal strife and increasing Black Nationalism. More radical members of the organization felt whites had no place in the group. Margaret's time in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee came to an end, but her interest and work in social activism did not.

During her time in Tallahatchie County, Margaret met Len Edwards, the son of former California Congressman Don Edwards (the same man who had donated the Valiant to SNCC) at Jessie Mae Brewers' house. Len encouraged Margaret to come out to San Francisco and attend Stanford University. She went out West and attended Stanford for a semester before befriending a group of students who were active in the Black Student Union at San Francisco State University, where she transferred and eventually graduated. In contrast to what she believes are horrible schools in the Delta today, she believes that her education at East Side High School in Cleveland, Mississippi, prepared her well for college level work in San Francisco. Even in California, however, her social activism took a primary role in her day-to-day life.

Soon after arriving in California, she began socializing with people from the area and from Alabama who were calling themselves the Black Panthers. Some of



Figure 15. Eugene Brewer of West Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. Mr. Brewer is one of the many rural Deltans that registered to vote in the summer of 1964 at the behest of Margaret Block. He was present the night of the armed confrontation in front of the Brewer house.

these people had organized the group back in Alabama while conducting voting rights education projects and putting on mock elections for potential rural voters there. They made plans for the organization working out of the basement of a building on Steiner Street in downtown San Francisco. She recalls a coming-out party they had at which some toughs from the East Bay—Eldridge Cleaver et al—showed up brandishing their weapons and claiming that they were, in fact, the real Black Panthers and that Margaret and her friends were not to use the name any more. They stopped using the name. Margaret doubted the effectiveness of the radical Black Power Party. She points to a march in Sacramento in which the Panthers wore their uniforms and displayed bandoliers as evidence of the fact that they had a lot to learn about activism. “That was stupid. It was suicide. I didn’t have any desire to prove myself that way. If you got power you don’t need to show it.”

After graduation, Margaret went on to a career as a public school teacher (young elementary students) in the consolidated school system of San Francisco. She speaks often and fondly of her years as a teacher, and has a definite love of kids today. She tells the story of a young boy in one of her classes in the 1980s. The child had trouble learning and sitting still. “That kid was always drumming on something,” she recalls. Although Margaret is not fond of rap music herself, she got the idea to help the boy learn mathematics through rhythm and rhyme. When she returned to the Delta in 1990, she went around to several of the predominately black schools in town to talk to administrators about using her experiences as an educator and an activist to teach ethnic and multicultural issues in the classroom. She met a bureaucratic dead end as local officials dismissed her ideas and offer out of hand. The experience left Margaret bitter,

and she believes that school administrators were threatened by the notion of an outsider offering to bring something into their curriculum that they had not already provided.

Alma Block, Margaret's mother, became sick in the late 1980s and Margaret came home to take care of her. What she saw of Mississippi she liked, and a few years later, after Alma died, she moved home. She figured that she could live better in Mississippi on her teacher's pension than she could if she stayed in California. When I asked her if she had any trepidation about moving back to the Delta, she said, "No, it was a new Mississippi—or so I thought." For Margaret, the reality has been worse than she suspected from the distance of California. "The schools are terrible! And these folks are teaching somebody's children." She speaks angrily about the crack addicts in her neighborhood that walk up and down her street at all hours of the night. Politically, Margaret believes Cleveland is in trouble. "Mayor King doesn't know anything and he doesn't do anything. He has no idea about the needs of the people in this community." She saves particular outrage for the situation of people in the housing projects called East Gate. The development was constructed on the eastern border of Cleveland's municipal boundary. Margaret cries, "Those people can't even vote in city elections!" Geographer Charles Aiken writes about the political plight of such residents in under-annexed spaces. Turning the annexation debate on its head, Aiken notes that most communities of people resist municipal annexation while such people as those in East Gate desire annexation. As it is today, residents of East Gate are spatial members of Cleveland, but do not enjoy city police protection or an effective political voice. Aiken, and observers like Margaret argue that the city resists annexing East Gate because they

fear tipping the racial balance of power in the city, which is still dominated by whites (Aiken 1987).

Margaret admits that her roots are in the Delta, but she says that her home is in San Francisco. I asked her once if she ever thought about moving back to California, and almost before I had the question out of my mouth, she responded, "Everyday." As mentioned earlier, this is a question, and an identical response, that I have offered and received with almost every return migrant to the Delta that I have met. For Margaret, the decision to stay seems to be a financial one. She lives in the same house that her great-grandfather, Boat Deggins, built. It is the same house that was moved from its original location along the railroad tracks in 1952. As a homeowner, it is hard to go back to being a renter, especially in a place as expensive as San Francisco. Another reason that she stays is that in the last few years, her life has become more active, and her circle of friends has widened.

In the fall of 1999 I invited Margaret to speak to a class that I was involved in, a course on the history and geography of the Mississippi Delta. The professors of the course organized the course by inviting people from the community with knowledge and expertise in various fields to address the class. I mentioned to the instructors that I knew a woman who had been active in the Civil Rights Movement in the early sixties, and that she knew activists such as Stokely Carmichael and Georgia Congressman John Lewis. I warned them of her animated character and political radicalism, but they were eager to hear her. Although the lecture served to introduce her to the Delta State University community, a community in which Margaret is now comfortable and active, the lecture was poorly received. Elderly Clevelanders were a common presence in the

class, as the instructors cultivated a kind of learning community in their presentation of the class. As such, there was a fairly large contingent of conservative nonacademics present in the class that night.

Margaret began by noting that she never wears cotton since she considers that fabric to be a symbol of her people's oppression. Later, she mentioned the name of a former mayor of the city of Cleveland, Jimmy Daniels, and offered that he never did anything. By this, Margaret meant that Mr. Daniels was not a city official who was concerned about the severe problems that existed in the poor black community at the time. Although Margaret did not say anything explicitly negative about the former mayor, her voice dripped with contempt as she dismissed his leadership agenda. In the class that night sat a member of Mr. Daniels's family—the husband of Mr. Daniels's granddaughter. At the mention his wife's grandfather, the gentleman spoke up, without waiting for Margaret to pause, and protested, "I can tell you one thing. He was a fine man." Taken aback, Margaret clarified, but did not apologize, by saying, "Oh he was all right I guess. He never did bother us any." By which she meant that Mr. Daniels never attempted to interfere with her group's political activities. Then she added, "He's like the current mayor you have. He didn't do anything."

As I spoke with members of the class and community who were present that night, I learned that there was a lot of anger about the fact that she had stood in front of them and said the things that she did. One longtime Cleveland resident went so far as to call her a racist. Others expressed shock at the palpable quality of Margaret Block's anger, but went on to add grudgingly (perhaps for my benefit knowing that she was my

friend and that I had invited her to speak) that she might have had a right to be angry given what she had been through in the Civil Rights Movement.

The following year Margaret served on a panel discussion in that same class. She sat next to a former Delta cotton farmer and dues paying member of the Citizens Council, a white person's advocacy group of the Civil Rights era that many have referred to—appropriately perhaps—as a rich man's Ku Klux Klan. For those familiar with the backgrounds of both of these panelists, the evening had a surreal quality about it, an odd juxtaposition of character and ideology. Margaret, who is usually talkative and not at all reserved, seemed intimidated by the white man to her right. In one instance she began to speak about the all-black town of Mound Bayou, a topic with which she is knowledgeable, but the former white supremacist broke in by saying, "Wait let me tell it. I know about Mound Bayou." Stunned, Margaret demurred. As far apart as these two individuals seem, it is possible to find a common ground of community between them. Margaret is named for Judge Green's wife (Alma Block's employer). The gentleman on the panel often tells the story that it was this same Margaret Green who introduced him to his wife.

Margaret is a woman torn between places and eras. The Mississippi is her Delta, she has familial roots here and real property here. The Delta is a place that challenged her and demanded all of her strength and courage, and this she eagerly gave in pursuit of a democratic ideal and a commitment to people she loved. Yet she gave it all up and went west to find her place and home. Today, she says that California is her home, but she lives in Delta. When her brother Sam died it was important to her that his ashes be brought back to the Delta for his remains to be scattered on the land that

was his home. In fact, his ashes were scattered on the tracks of the old Illinois Central. Ancestors of the Blocks once owned that land, and it was right that he came to rest there. Wrapped in Margaret and Sam's story there is a theme of rootlessness. They faced struggles that few Americans have had to face in a land that should have been their own, and when their struggle was won, they abandoned it for California. They, however, came back; they came back home.

In some ways, Margaret's return home has been a continuation of the fight that she left when she quit Mississippi. Her life today consists of meetings, lectures, and dreams for a better Mississippi. She recently began a project to honor her late brother. Also, she is attempting to build an archive of African American family photographs through her contacts in the community. In this project she is preserving and honoring images of a forgotten people. She takes part in seminars and classes that take the Delta and its history as a topic for study because she believes that she still has a message to share, a message of what she has seen and accomplished, and a message of what she believes the Delta ought to be. In effect, her return has offered the opportunity to pick up where she left off nearly thirty years ago.

Dorothy Mae Scott

In the course of my research I met Dorothy Mae Scott, a return migrant who lived many years in Chicago (Figure 16). She was born in Sunflower County, Mississippi, in 1919 and spent her youth "making crops" with her family on the Marshall Plantation in the Mississippi Delta. Her family lived in a small house that was often overcrowded with cousins, half siblings, and other extended family members, a pattern observed by Carol Stack in her early studies of the black American family.

Once she even lived in the same house with young Chester Burnett, known in the music world as blues singer Howling Wolf.

As a teenager, Dorothy fell in love with a blacksmith named Ruffin Scott who lived on Will Dockery's Plantation on the Sunflower River near the Bolivar County Line. Recently, I found Ruffin's name painted on the side of the decaying blacksmith shop at Dockery. Ruffin had a reputation in those days as a lady's man, and must have been attracted to the pretty young girl; Dorothy had what she called "good hair" and says her in-laws often joked that she looked like a Gypsy. In African American vernacular, "good hair" is an expression that means straight hair. Dorothy also had light skin, or "bright" skin in the vernacular. Perhaps aware of the young man's history with local girls, Dorothy's mother discouraged the relationship. In spite of her mother's advice, Dorothy secretly married Ruffin and they began their life together.

Dorothy's mother began to encourage her to leave the Delta in search of better opportunities up North. Later in life she studied practical nursing at an all-black vocational school in the Delta and took a series of jobs as a live-in caretaker for wealthy families in Chicago. Although Dorothy worked for twenty years in Chicago she never lost sight of her goal to return to the Delta and live in peace and independence on her own land. Ruffin, however, was content to stay in Sunflower County. Eventually, he traveled North to Chicago but never liked it much and never stayed long. They began a life of marriage that to many might seem odd in that they seldom lived together. Mrs. Scott moved to and from Chicago several times throughout her life but she always returned to Ruffin and the Delta. Her moves were so frequent that it was difficult for



Figure 16. Dorothy Mae Scott, Sunflower County, Mississippi. Photograph made while Mrs. Scott observed laborers retrieving dead pigs from her barn in the winter of 1998. Photograph by Kim Rushing.

her to remember specific dates regarding her life history. What was, however, fresh in Dorothy's mind was the fact that she was a landowner.

In 1970 Dorothy received nearly two acres of land near the Dockery Plantation from an I.O. Brownlee for the price of one dollar. Dorothy arranged to buy an old wood-frame house from Will Dockery. Ruffin and Dorothy moved the house to her small plot, a site where it still sits. The following year Mrs. Scott arranged to buy a tract of land near her house. This second tract covered forty-three and one half acres of relatively well-drained land along Lead Bayou, which she bought for a price of 10,000 dollars. When Dorothy referred to her land, it is this larger tract that seemed to be most important to her. When she spoke of buying land she only mentioned this tract and that she had obtained it from her godmother, although after visiting the tax office in Indianola, I learned that she had in fact obtained the total sum of her land in three separate transactions; the third was a 6 acre plot adjacent to her house plot bought in 1986. The warranty deed states that Mrs. Scott paid 750 dollars down payment, and agreed to make annual payments of 1,500 dollars until the land was paid off. Although Dorothy was, admittedly, a poor money manager, she made her payments and paid off the debt, and as she neared the age of retirement, Dorothy began to see a future for her and her family on that land in Mississippi (Figures 17 and 18).

She witnessed a multiple homicide—a drive by shooting—not long before she left Chicago for the last time. She was at a laundromat near Jackson Park hospital, on the South Side, when she noticed a “wine colored car” with three young men inside who kept circling the block. Someone standing by the window said aloud, “Now what is he looking for?” Dorothy, however, paid little attention. Later, as Dorothy walked back



Figure 17. Dorothy Scott's Land in Sunflower County, Mississippi. This flooded land is a portion of Mrs. Scott's smaller plot.



Figure 18. Dorothy Scott's Forty-three Acre Plot in Sunflower County, Mississippi.

home, she noticed the same car slow beside her, and the one of the young men asked her how she was doing. "Then they spied these other boys coming down the street," she recalls, as her husband, Ruffin, interjects "People getting killed up there every day!"

She finishes the story:

Then they shot 'em, and one of 'em fell. Then they shot the other, and he fell. Then they shot another, and he run. And then everybody run; we run, up towards the Jackson ParkHospital. And he was running and he was bleeding so bad, they must have shot him in the head or something like that. He was bleeding all down his face. And he didn't have on no shirt. He had his shirt on when they shot him though. I don't know what happened to his shirt. And I said, 'Run mister run!' And he said, 'You better hush lady or they're liable to shoot you. I got to the hospital a little before he did, and he just come up and fell right at the door, right on the steps.

As she finishes the story, her voice becomes quiet, and she states, "I said, oh I better go home now." She pauses a moment, and adds, "But you know, its rough down here now. Ruleville is rough. All these places are rough."

Around the time that she moved onto her land she bought a combine and a tractor with the idea that one or more of her five daughters or four sons would move home and help her farm the land. None of her children shared her dream of an agricultural life in Mississippi, and by the time I met her, the equipment had never been used and both pieces sat idle and rusting and were beginning to be strangled by weeds. After Mrs. Scott realized that neither she nor her family would be farming the land, she leased it to some farmers from nearby Cleveland. In an odd historical twist; Dorothy Scott became a landlord to white farmers. As if in protest to this new racial equation in the landlord/renter arrangement, the men never paid the rent they owed in three crop years and, sadly, her experience as a landlord was a failure. She sought action in the local courts, but never received any money from the farmers. Today the field is fallow.

In the last years of her life, Dorothy Scott lived in abject poverty. Oftentimes, after I visited with her at her home I felt ill; sometimes I came home and took a shower. One afternoon I crossed the muddy yard and climbed the three concrete steps into the house. Where once there were the exposed planks of the house's original structure there was a mosaic of pressed board, an alternative to plywood. In the corner, water stood about three inches deep. The well water that she had had routed into the house was leaking from a pipe near an old water heater in the kitchen. She complained that the man she paid to put down the pressed board flooring should have left a hole in the corner so that water could drain to the ground below the house. Once before she had mentioned to me that whenever she cleans the floor, water falls through to the ground. I found it shocking that her concern was that the workman had not accounted for the fact that she had no barrier between the floor and the ground. Nowhere in her statement was there a desire to seal the kitchen off from the earth below. She also complained about cockroaches. She said that if you lifted the pressed board flooring you would see them in the hundreds (perhaps thousands) as they scattered in every direction. She mentioned, "At night they run around this house like ants." The condition of grinding poverty had become so common to her that it had become an accepted part of her life. Perhaps it was similar to the housing that she had endured as a child living under the sharecropping system. The obvious difference was, however, that she owned this house and this land, a unit that may have brought her as much as fifty thousand dollars if she chose to sell out. Selling was never an option for Dorothy Scott.

Dorothy Scott loved her land, and in an effort to have her own, she endured years of hard work in Chicago. Living as she did in her patient's homes, she was often

the victim of sexual abuse and harassment. She recalled for me a time when she was caring for an older man in the city. Oftentimes he would come into her room at night while she was sleeping and begin to rub her back. Awaking with a start, Dorothy would be cross with him in a light way by saying, "Now Mr. Santelli, you get on out of here you old coot!" Even in a situation in which she was the victim of such a degrading experience her response was to affect a Mammy-like levity that one would expect to reserve for a child. Her subservience denied her the right of true self-defense.

African Americans of Dorothy's generation in the American South were often forbidden, and always hindered, from owning land. For such a people, land ownership can become a powerful symbol of success. Hortense Powdermaker writes in *After Freedom*, a beautiful ethnography of the Delta town of Indianola, that blacks in the Delta in the 1930s understood the power of land ownership and also acknowledged the social difficulties that came to black landowners in that time and place. Dorothy Scott lived within this system most of her life before she left Mississippi. From her vantage point she saw that land was the key to wealth and power, and that when combined with the power of whiteness, her people had little chance of attaining the dream of self-determination and land ownership that had eluded them since the end of the Civil War. Perhaps because she lived in a time when land was the key to prosperity and independence, she held tight to her small plot. Dorothy had reached a point in her life when she was prepared to see her agrarian dreams come true. The dream of land ownership motivated her through years of hard work in Chicago and it is the love of this land that forced her to persevere and remain on the land when times got difficult as they did in the winter of 1998.

The Scott's water had been cut off, they had no telephone, pigs and goats had the run of the place, the kitchen floor was rotting, and the bathroom was not functioning. Into this scene of utter poverty came a young boy; Dorothy became the legal guardian of her grandson Eric. Eric is a handsome and articulate boy in junior high, but something seems a little distant about him that goes beyond a natural shyness. He is young, of course, but seems oblivious to the pain and chaos around him. He tells me that his grandmother found two dead pigs that morning and that she had gone to Ruleville to find someone to help her. He says that he likes Mississippi, but in the same breath whispers that his mother is dead. He enjoys math, and tells me of his two favorite teachers at Margaret Green Junior High School (the same Margaret Green for whom Margaret Block is named), one who is white, the other who is black, and both are named Jones.

A little while later, Dorothy arrived, and there were two young black men in her pick up truck with her. If the man she had paid to build her pig pen had finished the job she would not need the two black men to help her deal with the dead pigs. She had paid the man, but he did not finish the work, a pattern that was common with Dorothy and the way she dealt with small contractors. As a result of the contractor's (contractor may be too formal a term for the kind of men she hired in the community to do things on her place) failure, when cold weather set in, the piglets tried to warm themselves beneath the hogs and were crushed to death. As we stand under gray skies in the mud outside the pigpen, one of the men reaches in and grabs a piglet by the leg and lifts him out of the pen. The hog went wild with anger—snorting and moaning—as the other man picked up a stick and started beating the giant hog yelling, "Get back you!" As the hogs

scatter and are roused, Dorothy spotted two dead piglets. She began to groan and cry saying, "Oh, I worked so hard, and paid my last money for them pigs." Mixed in the pain seems to be a grief at having lost a pet. Her grief then gathers in the realization of her situation: she has no running water, little food, an inadequate house, "And I got a sick man in there." As if to punctuate this she wails, "We are suffering so!" I was stunned, and tried to soothe her by patting her shoulder.

As Dorothy and Ruffin's children began to observe that their living conditions were deteriorating they tried to get them to move. First, a son from Utica, Mississippi, came to take Ruffin to live in their home and a few months later a daughter in Birmingham came to take Eric to live with her. Dorothy, however, refused to leave. Abraham Scott, a son in Chicago, claims that they continued to send her money but that she "threw it away" on her animals and on unscrupulous laborers who often helped her on the place. In his words, "She just kind went back in time. She wasn't like she used to be."

Dorothy was an outgoing woman. On the day I met her she agreed to let me drive her into Ruleville to check on her water bill. It took me several weeks to learn from her how it had happened, but her water bill was nine hundred and ninety eight dollars for one month's use. Eventually I learned that a pipe had ruptured on the back of her house at the base of an exterior water faucet there. She recalled that water was spewing high into the air in an arc toward the edge of the woods. I asked her how long the water had run in this fashion, and after a brief pause, she replied, "About three days." I cannot offer any explanation as to why Mrs. Scott would let such a leak continue for so long. Perhaps she didn't understand that her water was metered and that

she was being charged for any water that came through the system to her property.

Perhaps she was paralyzed with anxiety since she had no skills with which to solve the problem, and her husband who had once been so handy was now incapacitated. Maybe she just never got around to thinking about it. Nevertheless, the Boyle-Skene water office had a perfect record of the water use on her place, and expected to be paid.

Most conversations with Dorothy contained an angry element, and she was prone to ranting about the threats that she perceived surrounded her existence on her own place. Although she was never far from laughter, she was never far from cursing “some bastard” who had it in for her. This angry behavior earned Dorothy the reputation as a crazy woman. Even Abraham, her own son, believed that his mother “was off in the head a little.” I am no psychologist, so I have no way to judge whether or not Mrs. Scott was of sound mind. I was merely there to listen and to learn from her, and in the sober light of my office, as I read my notes and contemplate her words, there is nothing to indicate that anything she ever said to me is unreasonable. It is possible that there were whites who were interested in buying her land from her. Dorothy was outraged at the manner in which prospective buyers would come to her house and look over her fields and tell her how much they could use what she had. One afternoon, a farmer named Booty parked his truck in front of Dorothy’s house, got down from the cab, and pounded on her door. As they stood together he looked around the place and out at the fields and said, “I could do a lot with this land here. I’d bring my family here.” Dorothy was mystified and angered at these words, because she had no intention of ever selling her land. What angered Dorothy the most was his attitude of entitlement and his assumption that such land was useless to a woman such as Dorothy. It could be

that Mr. Booty felt compassion for Mrs. Scott in that he saw the extreme that she lived in while understanding that a woman nearing eighty years old and who was responsible for caring for an invalid husband was ill suited to live in such a situation. I shared many of the same views. But to Dorothy, it was the cavalier manner in which he told her these things that raised her ire. To her, he was just a white man, acting out his role of superiority in a way that had been his to execute since the days of sharecropping. Her life was not his business.

On April 5, 1999 a seed deliveryman from Ruleville found Dorothy Mae Scott dead, lying beneath an oak tree in the dirt yard beside her house. The following piece appeared on the front page of the Bolivar Commercial on June 7, 1999:

Woman found dead outside Miss. 8 house. Dockery—Dorothy Scott, 80, was found dead at her home about sundown Saturday by a young man delivering animal feed. Scott was last seen Thursday afternoon, before she was found outside her on Mississippi 8 between Cleveland and Ruleville. “We just don’t know right now,” said Sunflower County Sheriff Ned Holder of Sunflower County, when asked the cause of Scott’s death. “We really won’t know anything until the autopsy comes back from Jackson.” Holder said that his department was investigating Mrs. Scott’s death as a homicide at this time. Her hair was found at the scene. “We just don’t know if she was dragged out of the house,” Holder said, “or if she came out on her own.”

It was a horrific scene since her body had been exposed for a few days to the elements and animals. A wreath now marks the spot. Immediately, there were rumors in the black community that a small group of African Americans had gone to Mrs. Scott’s house the night that she had died. According to some, the group consisted of two men and a woman. The story circulating in the community stated that the three had spent the evening smoking crack cocaine and drinking whisky. After they had consumed it all, they wanted more but lacked the money. One of the men, Edward Gene Ward, knew Dorothy and was aware that she lived alone out on Highway Eight

between Ruleville and Cleveland. In the course of the investigation the woman in the group said that they had driven the short distance from Ruleville out to Dorothy's property and turned onto her gravel drive. Facing the highway, there is an abandoned house and the driver stopped the car behind this house. The Scott's house is about 200 yards behind the abandoned house on a small rise above a stagnant bayou. Ward got out of the car and walked back to the house. In summer it is impossible to see the house from where the others claimed to have parked, since there is a line of trees along the ditch in front of the Scott home. The woman claims that Edward was gone for about twenty minutes and when he returned he had a little more than sixty dollars. Curiously, he had blood on his shirt. As they drove back into town he placed the bloody shirt in a trashcan. The sheriff's department later found the shirt and sent it to the state crime lab in Jackson where it remains today, unexamined. In fact, a grand jury failed to hand down an indictment because there was no proof linking the suspect to the crime scene. The Suspect argues that the blood on his shirt was animal blood from one of Dorothy's farm animals.

Several months later the shirt still had not returned from the crime lab. Coincidentally, there was a series of articles in Jackson's *Clarion Ledger* that criticized the state crime lab for its immense backlog, to which officials at the lab responded that they were severely understaffed and under funded. Eventually, Ward came up with bail and was released. In the fall of 2000, Ward was arrested for breaking into the home of a ninety three year old black woman, raping her, and nearly beating her to death. The woman stayed in intensive care for several weeks, but lived to testify against Ward, and he is now serving a life sentence at the state penitentiary at Parchman, Mississippi.

Since Ward is serving a life sentence, the district attorney of Sunflower County has decided not to pursue the case against Ward in the death of Dorothy Scott.

Several months after Dorothy's death, I was out on her place, looking around and showing a small class the land and property that had belonged to Mrs. Scott. While we stood at the northern edge of her property, on the gravel road leading to Highway Eight, a man who might have been in his fifties drove up the lane to Dorothy's house in a pickup truck. We could see him as he parked next to the house and got out and looked around. After a few minutes, he got back into his truck, drove back past our group and out onto the highway. At that time, the land had passed into the hands of Dorothy's family. Ruffin, her husband, was still alive as were most of her children, and they had informed me that they had not yet considered what to do with the property. Perhaps the man's visit there was related to the story told to me by Dorothy concerning the various men who had their eyes on her land (Figure 19).

The life and death of Dorothy Mae Scott tells a story that may be near the center of the African American return migration to the Mississippi Delta. She worked for years for many white families in Chicago—and in the process, suffered many indignities—so that she could return to the Delta to claim a piece of her own land. She saved as best she could and returned in the 1980s after living outside the region for nearly twenty years. After several years spent on her own land in her own home she was found by an animal feed delivery man in her yard, murdered (Figure 20). Her return experience is one of despondency and pain and exemplifies a recurrent theme in my contacts with return migrants in the Delta. Among the themes that I believe are found in Mrs. Scott's life are the dream of land ownership for a generation of former



Figure 19. Abraham Scott. Speaking at Cleveland, Mississippi's United Baptist Church. Mr. Scott spoke in protest of the handling of his mother's murder investigation—an investigation that he believed was conducted improperly by the Sunflower Sheriff.



Figure 20. Site of Dorothy Scott's murder. The memorial was placed on the site by her family.

sharecroppers, the desire to be independent and left alone, fear of crime and violence in the Delta, a parallel to August Wilson's argument that the Great Migration was ill-conceived, and the continued struggle for African Americans in the Mississippi Delta to achieve economic justice and human rights.

August Wilson's ideas fit into Dorothy's life because Dorothy also was willing to forego material comforts, comforts that many of us may consider necessities: running water, relief from heat and cold, basic sanitation. Countless people urged Dorothy to sell some or all of her land to raise the money to improve her physical situation but such a notion was difficult for her to understand or even to consider. On several occasions I talked to her about the value of Delta farmland and what she might potentially profit by selling it and that such a venture could finance improvements on her home or might purchase a fine house in Cleveland or Ruleville. Whenever I broached such a topic she gave me a polite gaze of incomprehension that seemed to say, "Sell my land? Why would I sell my land?" This theme infused almost every conversation I had with Mrs. Scott: white people want my land, I must protect my land, I will not let them take my land. She owned land, implements, livestock, and a house. All she needed was her family to help her yet her family was scattered across the United States as a result of the Great Black Migration. As August Wilson laments, the migration severed ties to that same land that ought to bring meaning to African Americans in the South. So in this sense, Wilson's view of the Great Migration is accurate. Conversely, Dorothy's case refutes his thesis in that she was able to become a Southern landowner only by migrating to Chicago. A few months after her murder I called the Sunflower County sheriff's office and the dispatcher there told me that they had all known Dorothy and

that they were all fond of her. The dispatcher finished our conversation by saying, “She just refused to leave.”

Johnnie Jones

Mrs. Jones lives in Cleveland’s only upper middle class neighborhood. It is on the eastern edge of town, on Highway Eight, and was a white neighborhood until the 1980s, when it experienced rapid white flight. Mrs. Jones’s house is a large ranch that has a Mexican facade of stucco arches and Colonial Spanish wrought iron. Johnnie Jones is a pretty woman with light brown skin and the high sweet voice of a child, and on the day I met her, she wore a Liz Claiborne sweat suit. She said that she had forgotten that I was coming.

Mrs. Jones will be 65 this year and lived in Chicago for thirty-eight years. She is an only child, and muses, “I wish I did have brothers and sisters.” She says this as a confession of loneliness in a way that characterizes many of her statements and observations about life in Mississippi and in Chicago. She has the uncanny ability to remember the exact years, months, and days that she worked certain jobs. For example, she worked for Standard Coseman, an electronics company that made televisions, for 7 years, 7 months, and 18 days. Also, she recalls that she went to work for Jewel Foods on June 5, 1967. (Jewel foods is the same Chicago company that fellow returnee and neighbor, Wavon Morgan, worked for.).

Johnnie was born in 1936 in the area of Tutweiler and Webb, Mississippi. She went to school in Clarksdale, and eventually went to one year of college at the “aggie” school there. Today that school is called Coahoma County Community College, and is still predominantly African American. Soon after her graduation, she met Darnell

Beasley, whom she describes as a flirt. "He talked me into it and....the first time I had sex, I got pregnant, and I got married." That child's son, Johnnie's grandson, now lives with her. In those few years of married life in Mississippi, Johnnie had another child and began to understand that Darnell was a bad husband. "He was that type that wouldn't come home, you know. He was workin' at a furniture factory over in Roundaway." Eventually, she left him. For a while, she says she didn't know what to do. "He calls me from St. Louis sometimes," she said.

Her parents divorced when she was fourteen, and her father moved north to Chicago. Her mother stayed in Webb, working for a succession of white families. In fact, Johnnie used to spend her summers with her paternal grandmother in Chicago, at 1107 Marshall Fields (she has a keen memory for addresses). Her dad lived at 4919 West Fulton on Chicago's West Side, an area that by the 1950s had become home to the newer migrants from the rural South, who were generally poorer than those on the South Side (Lemann 1991). Her mother, on the other hand, stayed in the Delta and lived in a small house behind the family that she worked for: a Mr. Leon Smith.

Once while visiting her mother at the Smith's she found herself in conversation with Mrs. Smith. Somewhere in the conversation, Johnnie said simply, "Yes." Johnnie recalls that Mrs. Smith said something to the effect of "Don't you 'yes' me, you say yes 'Mrs. Smith,' or 'Yes ma'am.'" Johnnie's face, remembering the incident, flashed with dignity and anger, and she said, "I said to her, 'That's what's wrong with you people.'" She remembers that she was aggressive with Mrs. Smith in telling her what she thought of the way she treated black people in the Delta. Johnnie also remembers that her mother was quite angry with her and argued that Mrs. Smith was a good woman and

that Johnnie just needed to understand how to deal with white people and she would get along all right. Years later, in Chicago, Johnnie ran into a former employee of the Smiths in “the 1100 block of California,” and claimed that it was an awkward meeting and that they didn’t have much to say to one another.

This was the first time that young Johnnie had spoken her mind, face to face, to a white person. She remembers that her mother had tried to usher her out of the house quickly. She recalls, “My mother loved the Smiths.” Soon after this incident she met and began dating David Jones who lived in Chicago. She met him through his sister who lived in the Delta. Since Johnnie’s dad lived in Chicago, she often visited David while she was there. Soon, he sent for her in Mississippi to be his wife. Johnnie’s mother told her that if he loved her enough to send for her, she should go there and be his wife and, she added, “Accept nothing less.” At the time she left the Delta, she was working as a domestic for the Flautt’s in Clarksdale for twelve dollars a week. It was 1957. Johnnie married David in 1959.

In the middle of my first meeting with Mrs. Jones, her grandson, Ozzie, came home. Ozzie had arrived in the Delta to live with his grandmother about five weeks before, and was attending GED classes in town. He is twenty-five. His grandmother kept up a barrage of demands and instructions directed at him for nearly an hour. She seemed angry at his eating habits—once she made him sit down to eat—and she yelled at him, “Wash your hands before you go into my refrigerator!”

Her first address in Chicago was 1236 South Bishop at her sister Ruth’s place. Ruth had been in the Delta the July before Johnnie migrated, and had asked her if she wanted to come live with her in the city. On her first job in Chicago, with Standard

Coseman, she made tuners for televisions, and later worked on a machine that made the channel changers. After those seven years of work she fell victim to a mass lay-off. At some point in this period she bought (she always said “I” bought this place or that place, yet she told me that Mr. Jones didn’t die until 1984) a seven-room stucco home on Pine St. on Chicago’s northwest side. This region was a place for upwardly mobile blacks that were finding their way out of the rougher South and West sides.

On June 5, 1967, she went to work for Jewel Foods. As I mentioned earlier, Mrs. Jones has a sharp mind that is quick with numbers and numerical memory. Not surprisingly, she saves money well. Johnnie was always the one to save while her husband liked to spend money in neighborhood bars. During the years that she worked for Standard Coseman, and later, Jewel Foods, she claims to have saved 100 dollars each week. By 1978 she had saved enough money to do some investing. She bought a “7 flat” building at 1356 North Lorel in Chicago and became a landlord. A seven flat is a collection of seven apartments, each consisting of only one floor. Such flats may or may not be in one building. She believes that the building was constructed in the 1920s. It is an elaborate brick building with stoops, and molded window frames, and bay windows in the bedrooms. The ceilings were high and she said that she liked it best of all the buildings she would eventually own during her two generations in Chicago. She got the seven flat for 78,000 dollars in 1978 and paid 20 percent down with an 800 dollars per month mortgage. Significantly, the building was all white when she bought it. The neighborhood was just in the process of changing from predominantly white to predominantly black at the time, and many of the tenants refused to pay rent to Johnnie. She informed them that they would incur a \$50 late fee if they did not pay, and that she

would have them evicted. They fell in line. All of Mrs. Jones' life seems to involve issues of race, and this purchase was no exception. The tenants all were white, and two were doctors who had lived in the building for years. Later she bought a ten flat, and then another building that was a three flat. She makes it clear that she never lived in what she calls a "gutter," a slang term for ghetto dwelling. She didn't worry much about repairs to the extent that it hindered her from risking the purchases. When she bought the first property she prayed, "Please Lord, don't let this building be a problem." None of them were.

Her mother became sick, and had surgery, in 1978, and Johnnie came home to care for her. Mrs. Jones is profoundly dissatisfied with her life in Mississippi, and finds that she has no outlet for her social needs. After she sold her buildings and returned to the Delta to care for her mother, who still lives in Tutweiler, she says, "I got stuck." She said that the buildings that she once owned have increased in value such that she could not afford to buy them back again (Figures 21 and 22). "I don't have no place to go *but* Mississippi," she exclaims. Upon moving to the Delta, however, she chose not to settle in Tutweiler, to be closer to her mother, but instead chose to buy a house in Cleveland, in adjoining Bolivar County. "Tutweiler is no place for me, she emphasizes." Many houses in her neighborhood sell for one hundred to two hundred thousand dollars. There is a new house in the neighborhood, built by a funeral home director, that may have cost a half million dollars to build. After looking around the Tutweiler region, Mrs. Jones decided that the nice neighborhood in Cleveland was the only place where she could approximate the style of middle class living that she had enjoyed in Chicago (Figure 23).



Figure 21. Four Flat in Chicago. Owned by Johnnie Jones and was her favorite building.

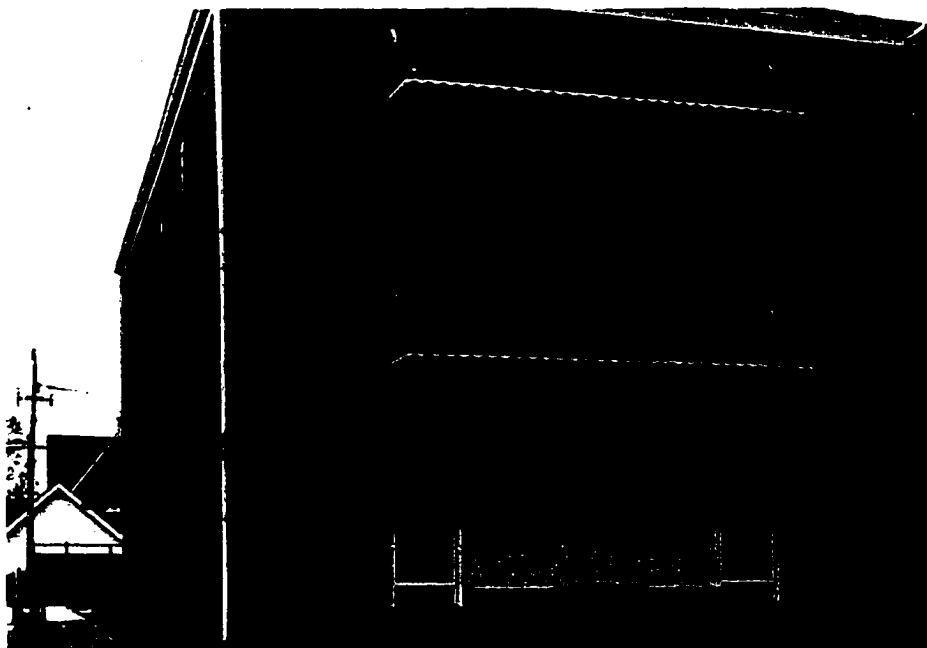


Figure 22. Seven Flat Complex. Johnnie Jones owned this Chicago property.

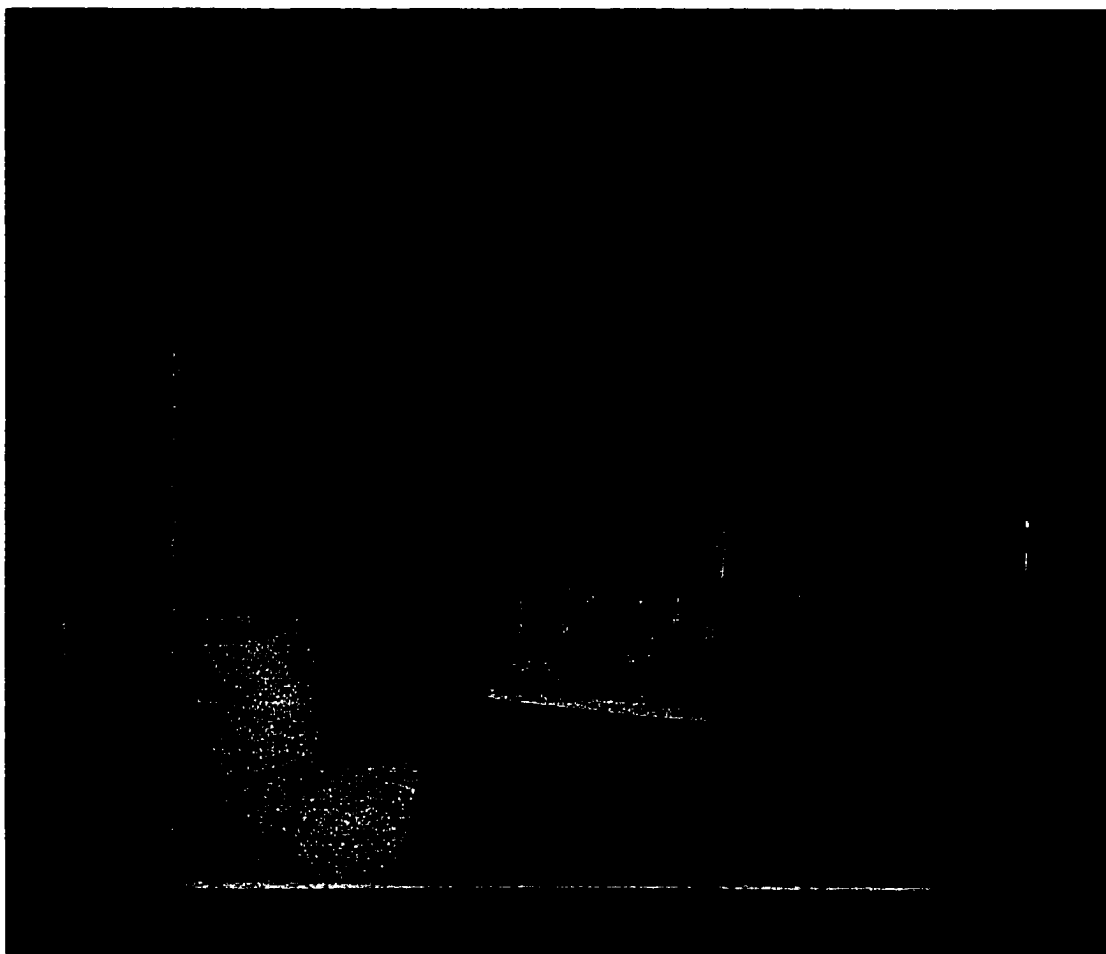


Figure 23. Johnnie Jones with Friends. Mrs. Jones is the second from the left.

I asked her about August Wilson's argument that the Great Black Migration had been a mistake, since the African culture that had been uprooted from the Old World

I asked her about August Wilson's argument that the Great Black Migration had been a mistake, since the African culture that had been uprooted from the Old World was uprooted from the Southern world where it had been maintained in its American agrarian form. She replied, "I don't think that's fair." She argues that she just couldn't live in the South in the 1950s, that it was too hard to make a living. Given her encounter with her mother's employer, it is likely that her perceptions of the racial climate of the Delta at the time had a large role to play in her migration also. Her father, however, considered, moving back to the Delta. He still loved the region. During one Thanksgiving visit that Johnnie made to Chicago in 1998 (after her return to the Delta), her father died. He died on a Saturday, but Johnnie had given another woman and her grandson a ride with her to the city, and they both had to be back to work in the Delta on Monday. In spite of her desire to attend the funeral, she left it to her family there to see that he was buried properly. All she could do was to send a large arrangement of flowers. "That's all I could do," she said.

Johnnie says that she retired from Jewel foods in 1977 and that it was a mistake. She also mentions (with much sadness in her voice) that moving down here to the Delta was also a mistake. She says that people down here cannot act as friends, and she notes that the people in her neighborhood, who all are black, rarely, come over or even speak. "I think about moving back," she muses. "My mother keeps me here." Her responsibility to her mother is interesting in that it was her maternal grandmother that raised her. Speaking of her grandmother she says, "That was my mommy." In a

statement that sums up black return migration for her, she says, "I was silly for coming back. I sold my last building for \$180,000 and now they want \$269,000 for it." She has two daughters and 5 "grands" in the Chicago area, another factor that causes her to miss her former home. Her grandchildren and the friends she left behind call her often. In remembering her properties and life as a landlord she says, "I was proud of myself."

Her grandson Ozzie recently got a job at Duofast, a fasteners manufacturer in Cleveland's industrial park. After a year and a half of employment there, which he enjoyed, Duofast instituted a large lay-off. After the lay-off, he took a job in Texas, near his sister. He had moved south to live with his grandmother after getting into some kind of trouble that I never learned much about. When he called Johnnie to ask if he could come to the Delta to live with her, she was delighted. He arrived at the bus station the next day. Earlier, I had asked him why he had moved to the South, and he said that it was to look after his grandmother, an explanation that rings hollow given his brief stay with her. I'm sure she was delighted to have him, because she often says, "Its lonesome down here." Johnnie has a vague disapproving manner toward Ozzie, although her love is apparent for him. "That boy's a good cook though," she offers.

Johnnie tries hard to maintain the material things that are important to her. Perhaps this is one reason that she became as successful as she became. She spends money to store her fur coat with the McRae's company. She owns a mink stole, two mink coats, and a beaver coat. She worries that moths will eat them if she leaves them in her closet in the Delta. She actually takes me back to a bedroom and rummages through a closet to show me a cream colored jacket that has two or three holes in it, that

she says were caused by moths. She is very neat and her house is always clean. These traits enter other parts of her life also.

She got so bored with her new life in the Delta that at one point she asked for a job at the local Kroger supermarket. Kroger and church are the only places she goes regularly, and she became acquainted with the manager there. One day she demanded in a familiar and joking way, but with an air of seriousness, "Let me have a job in here." She told the man that she had experience in the food industry and that she could learn any job in the place. "I know what I can do," she boasts. This statement has a confidence and finality in it that makes me grin (and want to cry for some reason). Apparently, the manager didn't take her request seriously, and played it off by saying, "You don't want a job in here." Johnnie let the issue die.

I ask about racism and fitting in socially in the Delta, and visibly she is taken aback. There is a long silence and I resist the temptation to let her off the hook by filling the gap of silence by another question. She said, "hm" and squinted for a minute or two, and then started talking about the church, totally ignoring the question. Perhaps it is not an issue that she feels comfortable talking about. "Church is the hardest," she offers. She tells a story about tithing. "I've always believed in tithing." She gives 100 dollars to the church each week. She usually writes the check while she sits in the pew. Once a woman in the church said, "I write my check at home." Mrs. Jones notes that the lady had a condemning attitude with the statement that implied, "You are just putting on airs by writing those big checks where everyone can see you." Johnnie claims never to have thought about it that way before. In a show of respect for her and her contributions to the church, Reverend Reed, her minister, has placed her on the

Concerned Woman's and Mother's Board. Of the services, she comments, "They're dead; too laid back or something."

Johnnie believes that there is tension between the minister and her for some reason that she does not fully understand. She quotes from Psalms 37:5, "Commit your fate to Yahweh, trust in him and he will act." Johnnie comments that she went to Moody Bible College and feels comfortable with her interpretations of scripture but when she offers these interpretations in Sunday school, the teacher seems angry and ignores her comments. The theme that she clashes with people in her church and in the community rises often. She comments, "I used to go to a great big church, about 2,500 to 3,000 members; these little country churches, ...I don't know." Her voice trails off as she contemplates her religious life and community in the Delta. When she first arrived in the Delta, she went from church to church to find one that suited her. In this search, she went to services at New Saint Phillip in Cleveland, and addressed the church when prompted by the minister by saying that she was "back home" in the Delta and was looking for a church to attend. In response, the minister commented that everyone in the church ought to pray that Sister Jones finds a good church home. That was it; he did not express hope that she would consider New Saint Phillip as her new church home. That he obliquely told her that she was not wanted at new Saint Phillip severely wounded Mrs. Jones. Her next-door neighbor, who also is a minister, never has spoken to her. "He hasn't even come by or called since I have lived here," she says incredulously.

One winter morning, I went to church with Johnnie at St. Peter's Rock Baptist Church. St. Peter's Rock is one of the older congregations in Cleveland. They worship

in a large and modern new sanctuary that is next to the older, red brick, church building that resembles many old middle class urban black churches that were built in the United States in the first half of the 1900s. Johnnie was dressed beautifully that day in a white wool skirt and jacket, accented with the kind of Sunday dress hat worn by respected black women. Johnnie also wore a mink stole around her neck. After the service, we stood to rear of the church catching up on events, while she introduced me to several of her fellow congregants. Just as I noticed that she had forgotten her stole, another woman walked up, joining us, with the stoles draped across her arm. She addressed Johnnie and said, "You don't want to forget this fine thing, do you Sister Jones?" There was a clearly recognizable sarcastic ring to the comment that the woman offered. Implicit in the comment was a sentiment, much like the one related to her tithing practices that she had mentioned earlier, that criticized her for flaunting her wealth and status as a former Chicagoan by wearing an expensive garment like a mink stole. Johnnie did not indicate, then or later, that she had perceived the biting nature of the comment.

She tells about her marriage to David and her voice lowers to near a whisper. They married in 1959 and in 1961 she became pregnant. One night during the pregnancy, after a particularly hard day's work, she went to bed with David and complained that her stomach hurt. He muttered, "Go to sleep," and tried to tell her that it was nothing to worry about, and went back to sleep. What bothered Johnnie was his flippant lack of interest or concern in her health and that of the baby's. Through the night, Johnnie's pain got worse, and she finally got up to get ready to go to the hospital.

With a finality that was barely audible, she told me, "I lost it. We never did get along after that."

Years later, in the 1980s, David's drinking progressed into alcoholism; the two separated but were never divorced. "He was living on the South Side," she remembers. To Johnnie, this was a fall from success as she always prided herself that she never lived in the ghetto. Once she went to see David in his home and was horrified by the way he lived in filth and poverty. The place was quite run down, "and all he could state was that he was hungry." He wanted to move back in with her so that she could care for him, but she did not even consider it.

I asked her once how her mother felt about her returning to the Delta to live, and she hesitated for several seconds before answering. Instead of answering my question, she said, "Well, she had me when she was 16, and I grew up with my grandmother. She was my Mommy." Her name was Rhoda Clemmons. "We didn't live in no country!" She noted that she would pick cotton sometimes, to make extra money during the fall, but that she had no talent for chopping. Once she was chopping for this man Whitney Smith and he criticized her work by saying, "Girl, you cuttin' down my cotton."

Recently, she saw Wavon Morgan working in his yard just down the street from her house. She remembered him from the Jewel Foods warehouse where they had both worked, she as a line worker, and he as plant manager. Now they both live in Cleveland's upscale black neighborhood. Her final judgment on the South, the Delta, and her return migration is bleak and sad:

The South ain't friendly no more. Everybody's for themselves. Nobody invites me into their homes, and here I was thinking that it would be the same as when I left. I was silly to come back.

Jessie and Dale Stanton

Jessie Stanton lives on Martin Luther King Drive in Cleveland, Mississippi, with her adult daughter, Dale. Jessie is 78 years old and was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Mrs. Stanton is a very proper woman who always calls me “Mr. Brown,” though not in deference, as can often be the case in the Delta where historic patterns of white supremacy still linger, but in her formal way. She is pretty, but in her younger days was stunningly beautiful. Jessie’s ranch house is on Cleveland’s east side, a predominantly black section of town. Her house is on the corner, near Cleveland’s all-black public high school. Just across the four-lane Martin Luther King Drive, the homes are poorly maintained shotgun houses. Jessie’s side of the four-lane is the beginning of Cleveland’s middle class black neighborhood. Johnnie Jones’s house is not far away. Mrs. Stanton’s yard is well kept—Wavon Morgan, another return migrant comes by regularly to look after things—and the overall appearance is ordered and neat.

Jessie left Mississippi in 1936, and moved to Detroit where she lived with her Aunt Vergie, her father’s sister. Both of her parents were happy to see Jessie go to Detroit to live with Aunt Vergie at 4437 Lillybridge. Vergie had moved north to Detroit in the latter part of the nineteenth century. A photograph of Vergie shows her facing away from the portrait photographer’s camera, looking back over her left shoulder in a confident pose. Jessie tells me that Vergie made the dress and satin vest that she wears in the photograph. Vergie’s skin is light, and she exudes an aura of sensuousness that implies self-awareness and style (Figure 24). Jessie shows me several photographs. Some are of her sisters, who are very pretty and well dressed. Her older sister made draperies for a living and did the homes of Jimmy Hoffa and Marvin

Gaye in Detroit. Another photo is of Jessie and her husband dressed for a Halloween party in 1964; Jessie is dressed as a belly dancer and her husband is dressed as an Arab sheik. She often speaks of the active social life she and her husband enjoyed. They often met with their friends in one another's basements for parties. Jessie was a member of a women's social club that met the last thursday of each month in one another's homes. They played whist, a forerunner of bridge, and talked. This group was quite important to Jessie, and it is the lack of this type of social activity that troubles and saddens her about life in the Delta. "The group" as she calls it still meets.

In her first few years living in Detroit, she had a job at the old Hudson's Department store downtown (the building was demolished in 1998); she kept the job for one week. Like many young independent women in the 1920s and 1930s, Jessie graduated from business college. Soon after finishing school, the only job she could find was as a cleaning person on the men's clothing floor at Hudson's. She worked early mornings and became acquainted with a white salesman on the floor named Steven Simms. They chatted each morning, and eventually, he asked her out on a date. The floor supervisor, who was a white woman, observed the relationship and did not approve. Jessie immediately was moved upstairs to clean restrooms. The next day, her aging aunt Vergie, the beautiful independent woman who had come to Detroit in the late nineteenth century, led Jessie to the personnel office. She informed the supervisor there that her niece did not go to business college to clean restrooms, and quit the job for Jessie. "That was the only job that anyone ever quit for me," she remembers with a smile. Ironically, racial taboos (and white reactions to them) became evident to Jessie in Michigan before they did in Mississippi.



Figure 24. Vergie Burns. Vergie was Jessie's aunt who migrated to Detroit in the 1880s.

After Jessie's week at Hudson's she took a job at a black hotel as a switchboard operator. There she met Hollis Blanton from Murray, Kentucky, a town near the Tennessee border, in the Tennessee River Valley. He was born in Kentucky, moved to Nashville for a while, and then moved on to Detroit. After they were married, Hollis wanted Jessie to quit her job and stay at home; she never worked again.

Jessie's father had a huge impact on her—his name was Jesse also, although it was spelled differently. He was born in 1895 and lived until 1981. He was prone to make sayings that were full of wisdom. Jessie and her daughter Dale now call them "Jesseisms," and they called him "Jesse Burns, the Sage." For example, once in Detroit they were riding around with a man who had long lived in Detroit. The man kept pointing out sites of interest to him and of places related to his life's successes. He would say, "There I used to," and would mention some past achievement. This kind of bragging about what he used to do went on for a long time, and Jessie's father began to get irritated. This kind of talk bothered Mr. Burns, and he wanted to know what the man had done lately. To this end he would say, "*Used to ain't shit.*"

Mr. Burns worked for the Clarksdale, Mississippi telephone company for many years as a janitor, and the steady work kept the family in what they, and other blacks in that place and time, considered the middle class. Jessie never picked cotton or worked as a domestic in white people's homes. It was important to her father to shield her from that type of work. The phone company gave him a long distance allowance, and in later years, he called Jessie often in Detroit. Mrs. Stanton recalled that he would often go out at night to help the line workers during severe weather, even though he never earned overtime for it. After Jesse and the linemen would get in from their work, the boss

would make him complete his janitorial work while the others went home. After he finished and got home, Jessie remembers that he would lock himself in his bathroom and curse, "Them damn sons of bitches."

Dale, Jessie's daughter, is 53 years old and recently lost her job at a communications company in Detroit due to downsizing. She spends her days in Jessie's den, at the keyboard of an old Apple computer, smoking one cigarette after another. She is a large woman of intense Native American features. Ideas of social justice are important to her, and she is not shy about expressing them. Dale remembers her grandfather as a joker. She is a native Michigander and, I feel, was fascinated with her Southern grandfather. On the telephone, he would tell her stories about an elephant that he had in his back yard, and Dale couldn't wait to come South and see it. When they would visit, however, he would tell her that the elephant was on loan to the circus. Years earlier, he had fooled his own daughter, young Jessie, into believing that there was a money tree in the back yard. He would put the same fifty-cent piece under her pillow at night to get her to take her medicine. The effect that these memories of Mr. Burns has on the two women is powerful and emotional, as if his memory links them to a time when everything was right and happy, and the world had an order and joy to it. They glowed and laughed as they brought his spirit into the conversation. They loved him. Suddenly, a palpable bitterness came into Dale's voice when she remembered how the telephone company bosses treated him. They did not give him the employment benefits that they gave other, white workers, and in the end Jessie and Dale had had to sue the company for his pension. Dale is forthright and outspoken concerning issues of

race and fairness, while her mother is reticent, but always nods in agreement with Dale's analyses.

Dale remembers that when she was about nine years old, on a visit to the Delta, she first realized that the South was different in its racial climate. Her memory is that her grandfather "was always pulling on me." This memory is keen since it is not a story, but a physical recollection of the body. The narrative element of Dale's memory is that her grandfather was telling her that she could not do certain things. One specific recollection is of shopping in Helena, Arkansas, just across the Mississippi River from Clarksdale. Dale attempted to drink from a water fountain labeled "white" when her grandfather, Jesse Senior, pulled her back and directed her to the black porcelain fountain set aside for blacks. Another time, they were standing in line at a store to pay for their goods when her grandfather pulled her back so that a white customer could go ahead of them. Physical restriction and redirection are the ways that Dale experienced the Jim Crow South.

In the 1970s, after Mrs. Stanton had returned to Mississippi, Dale came to the Delta for a visit. She accompanied her mother-in-law to an appliance store where her grandfather once had worked. The white salesman had known Jesse Senior, and went on to name all of Dale's aunts and uncles to show how well he knew her family. Years before, Mr. Burns served as an agent for the General Electric dealer appliance store. He would recruit black Deltans to buy an appliance from the store, and the owner would give him a cut of the profit. Mr. Burns had called it being a recruiter "for boxes." He also arranged for the buyers to enter a credit plan for their purchase: one dollar down and one dollar a month. Dale and her mother laugh when they remember that Jesse was

such a good salesman that he could get rural people to buy a refrigerator who did not even have electricity. He told them that if they paid just a little each month, that it would take so long, that by the time they paid for the appliance in full they might have gotten their houses wired for electricity. "By then you'll have power," he told them. One day, Dale and her mother-in-law were appliance shopping in Clarksdale, and Dale got into an argument with the salesman concerning his treatment of them. Dale does not remember the details of the dispute. Dale felt insulted by the man's behavior and stormed out of the showroom. She embarrassed her mother-in-law, and she vowed never to shop with Dale again.

Although Dale was not a native of Mississippi, she married a Deltan. Once while the family was in the Delta to attend a funeral, Dale met and fell in love with a black man from Clarksdale. They were married and the two decided to move north. He promised that he didn't want to live in the South anymore. After a time in Detroit he began to miss the South and the two moved back to the Delta. Dale hated it, and the marriage ended. Dale has one boy, a teenager, and after the divorce she and her son returned to Detroit.

Jessie Stanton returned to the Mississippi Delta because of a rekindled love affair. As a young woman, Jessie was in love with a man in her hometown named Robert Stanton. They dated off and on until she moved to Michigan in the 1930s, when they were separated. Stanton served in the military during World War II. After he returned from the Navy and the War, "He just didn't adjust to the South," she recalled. The Navy had showed him another way in his absence. Like Civil Rights leaders Amzie Moore and Medgar Evers, who also were veterans of the war in Europe, Robert

could not abide a region that did not respect him, after risking his life for the supposed ideal of freedom and liberty. Robert and Jessie kept up with one another over the years through occasional correspondence, but their lives diverged along separate paths.

Her dad fell down a flight of stairs in the 1970s and had to go into the hospital, and an enormous medical bill began to mount. At this point she came back home to care for him and stayed for an extended time, to the degree that it began to feel to Jessie that she was once again a resident of the Delta. The telephone company would not pay the medical benefits that Jessie Senior was entitled to, and the family had to sue. Apparently, the company had given him stock payments over the years and although he wasn't educated he read the stock pages every day and knew to the penny how much money he had. Jessie recalls that her father often told her and her siblings, "I want y'all educated, but always remember, you can make it with mother wit; without it you're doomed."

She would drive down to the Delta, stay with him for several weeks, and return to her home in Detroit to be with her husband. One day while in the Delta, she was at a gathering in a friend's home, and someone mentioned that Robert Stanton was back in the Delta, and that he lived just around the corner. The friend said that if they called him, she imagined that he might come over. Jessie said, "If you call him, he'll be over in five minutes." The friend called, and indeed, he was there in a few minutes. Their friendship was rekindled, and although Jessie was still married to Hollis Blanton, she began to fall in love with her old sweetheart, Mr. Stanton. With each visit home to care for her father, Jessie saw Mr. Stanton, and soon her marriage to Mr. Hollis ended in divorce. Jessie and Robert married soon thereafter. Stanton was in the funeral home

business with a man in Cleveland, Mississippi, and the two began to be quite successful. Jessie and Robert enjoyed two decades together until he died in 1996. Sometime before his death, he had sold his interest in the funeral home business to his partner, and income from this sale supports Jessie and Dale today. The business still is located on Highway 61 south of Cleveland.

Jessie has always taken care of people. I asked her if this were so and she blurted out, "You better believe it; all of my life!" While in Detroit she cared for her Aunt Vergie and Uncle Frank in their old age. Uncle Frank was a mulatto, and Jessie says he was as fair skinned as I am. In fact, he often passed for a white man. He had spent his youth working as a Pullman Porter. Later, he went to work for Ford Motor Company and always considered himself a "Ford man." Dale points out (sarcastically) that his automotive allegiance might have had something to do with his Ford purchasing discounts. After caring for Frank for several years, Jessie realized that he was becoming too old to drive and she realized that she was going to have to learn. Hollis had sheltered her such that she had never learned; she had never needed to learn. Jessie took driving lessons, and in 1976, Frank bought her a brand new Oldsmobile Cutlass. He had wanted her to have a Ford Torino, but in the end left it up to her. This Cutlass was the car that Jessie would drive back and forth from the Delta until she finally moved to stay a few years later.

I ask Jessie how her readjustment to the Delta went in the 1970s, when she came home. She replied, "I went into a shell. I don't really have any associates here, maybe one or two. I don't have anything in common with people here. I feel that people sort of lear away from me." I find it interesting that she uses the term associates. It is a

term of business, but might be taken as being associated with another person. In any event, it is not a term one usually hears in the Delta. She talks about unreciprocated invitations and says, "People just don't return." At this point Dale, who was always present when I visited Mrs. Stanton, interrupts:

They are clannish here. They have their work, the schools they went to, the Greek system. Our dinner invitations don't get returned. These people are in an interest rut. People in Mississippi have a narrow worldview; you don't see Mississippi car tags outside the state much.

She makes the economic cultural observation, "In the Delta there is an ultra stratosphere of rich people and a little middle class. The rest are poor." This may be at the heart of her problem. I wonder aloud that the problem may be that they are firmly in the middle class and have middle class interests and manners, thus they have few people to socialize with here, since there is so much African American poverty. This doesn't quite fit, she counters, because there are several middle class Delta blacks that "don't return invites, or even come when invited." She recalls a large Thanksgiving dinner that she prepared and had invited several people over to share the holiday. When a half hour had passed beyond the appointed time, she called the homes of some of the invited guests. They muttered that they had forgotten about the dinner, and that they could be over in a little while, but that they couldn't stay long. This hurt Dale and Jessie deeply and helps shape their view of being in the Delta.

Willie Foster

Willie Foster lives in a small frame house in one of Greenville, Mississippi's older black neighborhoods. The land is lower in this part of the Delta's largest port city and the houses seem to be sinking together in the thick brown muck. Willie lives alone since he realized that he and his alcoholic wife could not live in the same house

anymore. He cannot bear to see her stumbling in the streets, but he is quick to note that he still loves her, although he hates the drinking. This mindset and attitude is like the man; positive, loving, philosophical, humane.

Willie Foster, who is blind and has lost both legs to diabetes and infection, returned to live in the Delta after nearly fifteen years in St. Louis, Missouri. Willie moved to St. Louis not long after he returned from World War II. He served in England as a truck driver for the quartermaster's corp. "I picked up dead people some of the time, and moved troops and stuff like that." Willie left Mississippi, he says, because he wanted to be left alone from his family. He was an only child, and as a result, he says that he has always liked doing things his own way. Moving to St. Louis, a city in which he had no family, was a way to strike out on his own. Today, Willie is back in the Delta and makes his meager living as a blues harmonica player, singer, and bandleader.

The day I met Willie for the first of our discussions, he was preparing to travel to The Netherlands for a quick tour with his guitar player Mickey Rodgers, a return migrant from Chicago. The two had plans to meet a Dutch blues band in Europe called the Jook Joints to play shows for several weeks. A promoter for the band had met Willie at his home while on a blues pilgrimage to the Delta and had invited the two musicians to come over to Europe for a tour. It is not unusual for Willie to entertain foreign guests in his home. The Mississippi Delta has seen a dramatic increase in this kind of cultural tourism. Even conservative groups like area chambers of commerce are looking to increase this kind of tourism. In this case, the guest offered to pay for the musicians' expenses to fly to The Netherlands to play. Willie was skeptical at first, but

later called the airline and found that two tickets were waiting for them at the counter in the Memphis airport.

The morning I stopped by, the two were scheduled to appear on the noon broadcast of a local television station, talking about their trip. I was amazed at the casual way that they dealt with being on television. I drove the van (although I had only just met them) and they did their piece on the set of Greenville's Channel Fifteen with an enthusiastic young anchor from Cleveland, Ohio. Before they went on the air, I mentioned to the anchor that they would be touring with European blues musicians, and she asked them about this irony, but they seemed uninterested. This was not their first international trip and the two are used to the adoration and respect that they receive from blues fans outside the United States. In their own country, and in the Delta in particular, they are largely ignored, having to settle for playing at country bars and restaurants for young white audiences that know little about their music or their backgrounds. Foreign audiences tend to be fanatical enthusiasts who elevate men like Willie Foster to God-like proportions. In the parking lot of Channel Fifteen, after the interview, I commented on how casual they were about the whole event and Mickey replied, "It's just a job (Figure 25)."

Willie maintains an ongoing commentary about how his music is about real life—his life—and how he is a true believer in love and people. This is not to say that bitterness is not just below the surface. As an African American man in his eighties who grew up in the Mississippi Delta, he has internalized the region's sense of racial power relationships. He says that anything that the black man has is something he got from the white man. He makes the point that even if a black man buys his own house

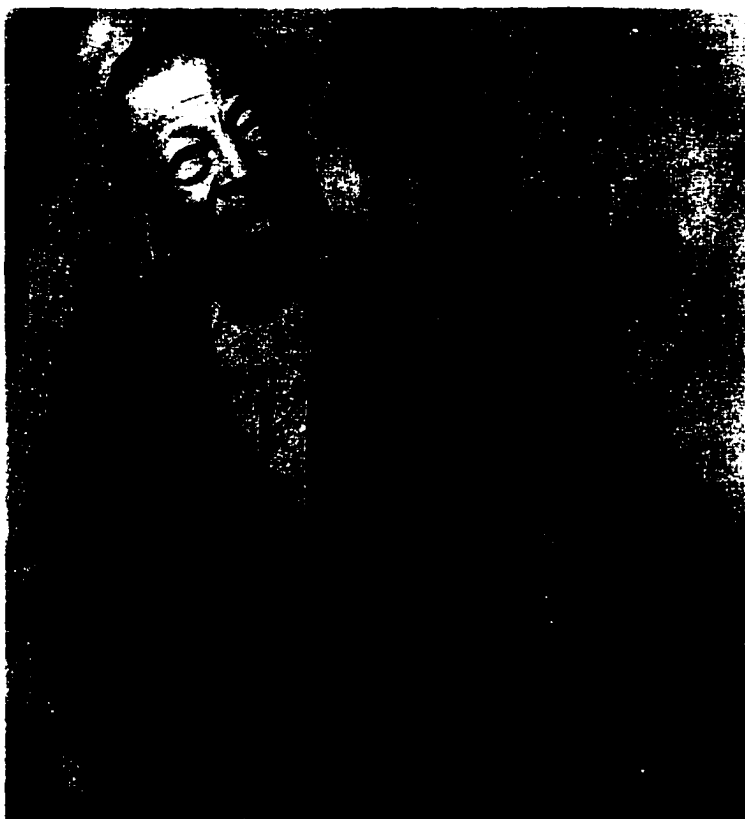


Figure 25. Willie Foster. Blues singer and harmonica player.

he still has to pay taxes to the white man. It seems a bleak, yet realistic, position to take.

There is a young drummer living with Willie at the moment. Willie and Mickey mention that the drummer “smokes up” all the money he earns playing music. This explains why he is living at Willie’s house. They say he uses crack cocaine, and I notice that he is extremely deferential to Mr. Foster in that he always says, “Yes sir.” The young drummer disagrees with Willie on the issue of African American independence in the Delta, but I did not hear it from him. While Willie was talking to me, the drummer fell asleep in an easy chair across the room. When Willie said that “some people” do not agree with his appraisal of black-white relations, he motioned toward the drummer as one who disagreed.

Because he is bound to a wheelchair, Willie has had a doorbell rigged that consists of a string running from the front porch to a copper bell inside. Most people, however, knock on the screen door, and Willie grunts, “Yea!” I was shocked to find that Willie’s left leg had been amputated since the last time I saw him. The doctors cut it off at the same length as his other leg. The previously amputated leg had become infected after he stepped on a shell while swimming in New Zealand. In this latter case, he cut his calf while being lifted into a van while in The Netherlands. The lower leg swelled throughout the trip, but he did not see a doctor until he returned to Mississippi. The doctors in Greenville treated it for a few weeks, but eventually had to amputate. At first the doctor was going to remove the leg just above the knee, but Willie instructed him to cut it even with his other stump. He said that it would save time because he believed that the doctor would eventually have to remove more of the leg to get all of



Figure 26. Willie Foster at Home. Greenville, Mississippi.

the gangrene. The doctor agreed, and Willie has been home from the hospital for about six weeks. His guitarist, Mickey, marveled at the fact that Willie had someone drive him up to Clarksdale, a ninety minute trip, to sit in on Mickey's gig there, on the day he was released from the hospital. Willie told him at the time that he just could not bear to sit around the house (Figure 26).

Perhaps as a sign that he is more vulnerable given his current wheelchair-bound condition, he keeps a pistol within reach at all times. Willie lives in a crime-ridden part of Greenville. I saw the butt of the pistol sticking out from beneath the cushion on his wheelchair. I noticed it, but did not mention it. It was as if he wants visitors to know that he is armed.

Willie Foster is eighty years old and is one of the last living blues musicians of his generation. That generation is the second or third cohort of musicians working in the tradition. Charley Patton led the first generation of Delta blues players. Willie's father, Arthur, was a contemporary of Patton's and often followed him around the Delta to attend his performances. Arthur Foster was a skilled folk dancer who danced in a style that Willie describes as "bug dancing," and he would dance at the places where Patton was playing. Blues musicians of Willie's generation included the greatest players of the post-World War II blues scene. Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, and Jimmy Reed were all in Willie's generation. Jimmy Reed, the long time guitar player for Muddy Waters's band, was a classmate of Willie's. Reed lived on a plantation that adjoined Willie's.

Foster's life incorporates the rural Delta experience that many, if not most, African American's knew in the first half of the twentieth century. He came of age on

the farm in an era when mules provided the energy to plow fields and boys knew they had become men when they could handle a two mule rig. "That's a man's job," boasts Willie. He claims that he could handle such a job when he was only nine years old. He continues:

It ain't like it is now, where there're ain't no stumps out in the fields, where people done dug them out with tractors. In dem days, there were stumps out in the fields and roots almost as big as your fist. If that plow would have hit that, and those mules pulling that plow, it's down in the ground about six to eight inches. When you hit a root you got to hold *on* to it. That's the hardest job you could have back in them days.

Willie's language is full of allusions to farm life. When speaking of how white bosses treated black laborers in the days of sharecropping, Willie argues that they used black people like farmers worked mules. There is not so much a palpable sense of anger in his horrifying analogy between a man and a draft animal, as there is the realization that he is making an observation about the things that he witnessed.

Willie Foster grew up on various farms in the Mississippi Delta. Willie was born in 1921, an only child. He is fond of saying, "I was *born* in the blues." If any blues musician can claim such a cultural heritage, it is Willie Foster. Foster tells the story of how he was born on a cotton sack, out in the field, while his mother was working as a sharecropper. As a young boy of about twelve, Willie learned why he was an only child, something that had always troubled the youngster. He overheard a conversation between his father and another man in which that man asked, "Arthur, how come you never had any other kids?" Arthur Foster told the story of how his wife, Sara Foster, was so far out in the field when the time came to give birth that it took fifteen or twenty minutes to get her and the newborn Willie back to the house. He remembers his father's words:

The boy was born out in that field and when they got him to the house the navel string had done spoiled and turned green, so when they cut it off, it was in my wife. Three or fo' months later, then the doctor had to cut everything out of her, so 'derfore, she couldn't have no mo' children.

Willie talks often about the sadness he experienced as a child because he had no brothers or sisters. One problem for him was that he had to do the work around the farm that otherwise would have been divided between a number of siblings. Oftentimes this extra work kept him from going to school while other black children his age were able to attend.

As Willie came to adulthood, he began to think about the city of Chicago. He felt that he had learned all he could about farming, and as young people tend to do, he wondered what else life might hold for him in some other place:

I done learned this farmin.' I know I know it so now I believe I done heard so much talk about Chicago, and everybody that go, leave home, stay three weeks and come back talking proper.

At first he resisted:

I done heard so many lies about Chicago. Like, you can go up 'dere and make some money. They say, "You don't need to be down here in this country." I said, "I'm doin' all right." I was seventeen years old; that was in thirty-eight.

Around that time, his cousin was visiting from Detroit and said, "I'm gone take you back to Detroit." He paid Willie's train fare, and the two left the Delta together. He had only been in Detroit for three or four months when he received word that his mother had fallen sick while working in the fields; the doctor believed that she had had heat stroke. Willie returned home and stayed for about two weeks and helped them "chop that cotton out," and went back to Michigan where he found a job in a rubber factory. His mother fell ill again and he returned to stay until he turned nineteen, just as World War II was reaching a fever pitch.

The selective service was just beginning to draft young men into the military, and the boss on Willie's plantation told him that if he stayed on the farm he could keep him from being drafted. By this time, Willie was becoming restless and was ready to move back to the North, so he told the boss, "Well, I want to go and learn the world." Willie's intention was to get a good job so that he could afford to buy a car for his parents. When he returned to Detroit, he secured a position at Ford Motor Company, hauling scrap iron from the scrap yards to the furnaces. Foster never had any doubt that he could get a job in the industrial Midwest. He knew that he was a hard worker and that the personnel men always tried to hire rural black Mississippians. Willie thinks they admired Mississippians for their hard work and good manners. During this time, working at Ford, Willie received word from home that he had gotten a letter of questionnaire from the Army. Eventually he received his draft notice and he went off to serve.

His life in World War II brought his first experience playing the harmonica in public. He was in London in 1942 when he attended a USO show. Heroes of Willie's, like boxer Joe Lewis, and musicians Billy Eckstine, Louis Jordan, and Cab Calloway were on the bill. Toward the end of the show, the performers asked if there were any soldiers in the audience who had a special talent that they would like to share onstage. Willie's friends all encouraged him to go up and play his harp since they had all heard him playing around the barracks. He went up onstage and told the keyboard player to play in the key of A, and they did a few jazz standards. After a round of applause from the audience, Eckstine asked Willie if he could sing. "I just loved Billy Eckstine's voice, with that clear as a whistle sound and them deep tones," remembers Willie.

“Then he told me to learn how to sing, ‘Because you can really blow that harmonica.’”

Willie came back from Europe knowing that he wanted to get a band and play music professionally.

He was discharged from the Army on November 17, 1945, and returned to Washington County, Mississippi to be with his family. After a year or so he went back to Detroit. Willie is unclear concerning the specific dates of his many moves between the Delta and the cities of Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis. The events that finally led him to St. Louis, however, are fresh in his mind. He was at the station in Chicago, standing in line to get a ticket for Detroit. “I was just green you know, straight in from Mississippi, and I was just looking all around. There was this man in front of me buying a ticket and I was looking at him, and I guess the man behind the counter thought I was with him or something.” The ticket seller asked Willie a question that he did not catch, but he replied, “Yes sir,” nonetheless. “He wrote me out and charged me eight dollars,” he said. When Willie got in line for the train to Detroit, the man at the platform looked at his ticket and said, “No, this is a ticket for St. Louis.” The railroad employee told him that he could go and wait by the ticket window for someone who was buying a ticket for St. Louis and he could sell it to him, and then get a proper ticket for Detroit. The more he thought about it, the more the idea of St. Louis intrigued him. He recalls thinking:

I believe I’ll try there; ain’t never been there. That’s where I want to go, where ain’t none of my folks, and I took that ticket and said I’m gone go to St. Louis to see what it’s like. Got off the train that morning fo’ day, and got me a place down to the YMCA and stayed all night. I lived there in St. Louis to almost 1962.

Curiously, Willie is unsure of the date that he moved to St. Louis. By piecing together his stories, it was probably 1948 or 1949 when he settled in St. Louis. When asked, he pauses, looks inward uncomfortably, but finally admits that he is not sure. This uncertainty is understandable given the number of relocations and extended stays that are his residential history. Perhaps most telling is the response I receive when I ask how long he lived in St. Louis. He laughs and says, "Oh, a long time!" He lived there, in fact, until his father was injured in an automobile accident on July 30, 1962. Dates of power and importance seem to have seared themselves in his memory while more mundane dates have faded into the past.

After coming home to help take care of his father, he never moved away again. He says, "I liked St. Louis, but Mississippi is my home. I wanted to get back in the dirt I come out of."

Wavon and Bettye Morgan

Wavon and Bettye Morgan live in Cleveland's middle class black neighborhood, the same neighborhood as Johnnie Jones. Their house was built in 1996, and resembles the houses that doctors and lawyers are building on the white side of town. There is a marble birdbath in the manicured yard and a television in the garage, where Wavon likes to watch TV while he works on his new Ford pickup truck. Wavon speaks in a voice loud and crisp. His diction is perfect and he carries an air of confidence—not arrogance, but self-assurance. He mentions at least five times that money is not one of their problems. Looking around their beautiful home, one would not think otherwise. Bettye is an interior decorator; therefore their house is finely detailed in pastels, brilliant blues, lush draperies, and polished crockery. Their living room is large (the house is

2,900 square feet) and is open to the kitchen and breakfast area. The formal dining room table is set with expensive china, silver, and accessories, seemingly prepared for a dinner party, though it is only two o'clock in the afternoon. Nothing is out of place, and I resist the urge to ask if they employ a maid to keep their home so neat. After the interview—my only meeting with the Morgans—Bettye gives me a complete tour of the house. She asks that I go into the master bathroom to notice how she has chosen colors that seem to make the room look larger. She also shows me her decorator's certificate from a Michigan school of art and design.

Wavon grew up on a farm outside of Merigold, Mississippi, and Bettye was raised "out from Shaw." They both laugh when they tell me that they once chopped and picked cotton. They do not seem to be embarrassed, but seem amused, and perhaps proud that their current living condition is so far removed from such humble beginnings. They seem to be talking about other people as they remember their childhoods. They have little to say about their early life in the Delta, but it is obvious that they consider the region to be their natural home. The two met at East Side High School (the historically black high school in Cleveland) in the early 1960s, and married upon graduation. They knew that they wanted to move to make a better life in the world somewhere. Wavon says, "We had ambition. There was no doubt that we were leaving." At the time, many black youths in the Delta received bus tickets as graduation presents, with the clear understanding that they would go north. They left Cleveland on May 27, 1963 in Wavon's 1950 Chevy. He notes, however, that they always intended to come back home someday. They are perhaps the only return migrants that I met in the course of the study who professed to have had such plans of returning home to live

someday. Before leaving, they knew that they wanted “to reap the harvest” of their Northern work back home in Mississippi. “It’s home,” they comment.

Wavon got a job in Chicago with Jewel foods in October of 1965. He eventually became the plant superintendent of the Chicago area food chain’s distribution warehouse. He noted that Jewel has over 200 stores scattered throughout Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, and Wisconsin. They merged recently with Albertson’s to become one of the largest food distributors in the United States. Wavon served as a dedicated company man and he retired in 1996. His hard work and loyalty to the company paid off; when he retired, he was making in the “six figures,” and had saved a sizeable retirement portfolio. His work and income allowed them to buy larger and finer homes as his career progressed. Their first move from Chicago’s urban center was to the suburb of Maywood, just west of the city. They lived in Maywood for over six years before a second move took them to an all-white neighborhood in the suburbs of Roselle, Illinois, on the western fringes of the city. Life was fast-paced in Illinois, and the weather was hard. If the weather was bad, Wavon often spent three or four hours a day in the car making the trip between Roselle and Melrose Park, where the warehouse was located.

They are proud to show me pictures that were taken at the going away party given to them by their neighbors in Roselle. In one photograph, Wavon is standing between two or three of his neighbors, all with arms around one another’s shoulder. It is clear from photographs that there was real friendship between the families in the neighborhood. There is an implication in the photographs, and in the way Wavon and Bettye speak about the racial nature of neighborhood friendships, that all parties

involved took pride in overcoming the anxieties that often coincide with racial integration of previously all white residential areas.

Their time in Chicago was not without any experience of racial tension. They remembered living in Chicago in 1968 when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. "It was bloody," says Mr. Morgan. A white man who worked in their neighborhood was savagely beaten and stumbled to their doorstep. They cleaned him and fed him and smuggled him out of the neighborhood after dark. Wavon notes that the rioting was much worse than the news portrayed, and that he believed that the media did not want people to know how bad things were.

They always came back to the Delta once or twice a year. The Morgans liked to come back in May or April before it got really hot, and it was difficult for Wavon to leave in the holiday season because his business was so active then. Wavon remembers—he is a loud talker and Bettye rarely speaks—that once while visiting the Delta in the fall, Bettye wanted to stop the car so that she could get out and pick a little cotton to take back to their suburban Chicago home. Wavon remembers saying, "No way; I'm never picking cotton again!" It is a funny story, but somewhere beneath their wealth and comfort lurks seriousness in the statement. They mention, "If you don't come back often, you lose those ties to home." Family and friends from Mississippi often came to Illinois to visit them. Wavon adds that he secured many jobs for cousins, siblings, and other family members.

When asked why they left, they laugh as if it is an insane question, as if the answer is obvious. They left for opportunity, to find a place where the "fruits of life were greater." They left also due to the racial tension of the time. Wavon levels his

gaze at me, laughs, and says, “You people were sick back then!” He seems sorry about saying this, and immediately says that he is only kidding and that he is sure I know what he means. I do. Finally they say that they wanted someone to be able to write about their story. They wanted to be able to say, “We left here with nothing and returned millionaires.” They are genuinely stumped when I ask them to comment on why they have been so successful in life. They stumble around for words and come back to the notion that it must have been, “God’s hand that protected us.” They note that since their parents were not educated, they had played no role in encouraging them to achieve in their studies. When I ask about the role of childhood religious training in the black church, they note that that may be why they felt that they could achieve something greater than what their parents and their parent’s friends knew. They recall a high school friend named Shelby who they always thought would be a professor because he always “hit the books and had beautiful handwriting.” He became an impoverished alcoholic. Wavon appears sorry, if not ashamed, to call him a bum. “He lives in a hovel,” he says quietly. They do not know why their lives turned out successfully. This may be the only time they were at a loss to explain something to me.

Erica Outlaw

One of the more unique aspects of black return migration to the Mississippi Delta is the return—a return in the broadest sense—of those children and grandchildren of original migrants. These returnees fit into a definition of black return migrants since the Delta is a place that holds regional and historical significance for them. Almost all returnees in this category have at least a limited experience with the region, such as summertime visits, attending a wedding or funeral, or listening to stories and accounts

of the Delta from family members who grew up in the region. Most return migrants of this type arrive to live in the Delta as a result of some change in their life situation. In some cases, the parents of minors have decided to return to the region, in other cases they are coming to help care for a grandparent or family member who is ill.

In my experience among return migrants who are children or grandchildren of original residents of the region, there is ambivalence about living in the Delta. Most of these young people left urban or suburban homes outside the Delta to come to a place that is a distant homeplace, not an accepted home. These young people are members of a different culture, a culture of urban life, or at least a life that could be considered in the American economic mainstream. Even those young returnees who come to the Delta from urban enclaves of extreme poverty are accustomed to a living space that includes exposure to much of what passes as American popular and economic culture: urban malls, multi-screen movie theaters, professional sports events, and proximity to the nation's main transportation arteries. The Delta strikes these returnees as markedly rural and culturally isolated, just as there is a cultural distance between them and long-time residents of the Southern region.

Erica was born in Dayton, Ohio in 1976. She lived there for two years until her family moved to the South Side of Chicago, where they lived for a short time, until her father got a job near Decatur. Under the florescent lights of the snack bar at her college student union, during our first lengthy discussion, Erica mentioned (at least five times), "We were constantly moving." Eric's mother and father met and married in 1973 in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Her mother, Annie, is 48, and her father, Noland, is about 62. Noland already had a child when he met Annie. "Daddy had a lot of women," Erica

remembers. Erica's parents divorced right after the family moved home to the Delta. This event led to Erica making her home in the Delta while both her parents moved on to other cities, and to some extent other lives. Recently, Annie decided to move back home to Clarksdale.

Erica has little contact with her father, although they talk on the phone from time to time. Erica comments that her father is restless, and is always moving to improve his economic condition. She also comments that he is an educated man, and that he has plenty of money. After leaving Chicago, Noland took a job as a chemical engineer in Dalton, Illinois. For most of his career, his job has kept him in the field on different construction sites, and Erica says that it is often difficult to get him on the phone. "His secretary always says that he's out on some job," Erica says. She goes on to say, "My dad is all about money."

By the time the family moved back to her parent's homeplace in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1987, the family had moved three or four times. Erica was surprised to find that there were five people in town that claimed to be related to her. The story might have arrived at this point and resolved itself into a romantic regional homecoming, but Erica knew that something was wrong in her parent's relationship. She remembers different women "always calling the house" asking for her father. It amazed Erica that her father's women friends were so bold as to call his home, knowing that his wife, Annie, was likely to answer the telephone. Oftentimes, Annie would curse the women, and slam the telephone down in disgust and grief.

Soon, Annie and Noland were separated and loneliness set in for Erica. Erica's mother moved away to New York City, to take part in a training academy of some kind;

Erica does not remember the details of the training. One of Annie's friends talked Annie into going to New York for the opportunity. It seemed to Erica that her mother was mainly reliving a single life that she had missed out on as a young married woman. Erica was hurt and confused at being left behind, as her mother's life changed with divorce. Meanwhile, Noland drifted back to Illinois to his work and girlfriends, and Erica moved in with her maternal grandmother in Mound Bayou, a historically all-black community in Bolivar County.

These were the worst days of Erica's life, as she suddenly was alone (except for her aging grandmother) in a strange place that was far from her native Midwest, both culturally and geographically. Erica recalls that, in those early days of her family's separation, she would sit alone in the floor of her room in Mound Bayou late at night, and wrap her own arms around herself, and weep. "I used to do that every night," Erica recalls, without much emotion. She missed her mother terribly, but visited only once. On that visit, she recalls that her mother was emotionally distant, and often corrected her speech. After hearing Erica refer to a "pop," Annie said, "Up here it's a soda, baby." A few years later, in 1990, Erica remembers that Annie missed her own mother, and returned to Mound Bayou, Mississippi. It seemed curious to me that she did not say that Annie missed her own daughter. Now they both live in Clarksdale, and seem to have rekindled their relationship.

Describing her life in Chicago, she says that she went to school right across from a housing project, and used to see, and deal with, gangs like the Vice Roys, the Gangster Disciples, and the all-female Pretty Young Things (PYT). "You had to be careful what colors you wore," she remembers, implying that wearing the wrong colors

could get a person into trouble with a gang. These formative years in urban Illinois have left their mark on Erica. Her style and manners are wholly unlike those native to the Mississippi Delta. She wears her hair in a semi-straightened wave and her clothes tend to be tighter, and slightly more sexually provocative, than young women in the Delta. She stares directly at men with whom she converses in a way that is at once confident and sly. Her speech is patterned after a Northern dialect common among urban African Americans. She punctuates her statements with rapid jerks of her head, and affects a tough—but pleasantly familiar—stance with her professors.

At about the same time that Erica began college, she got a job at Sam's Town Casino in Tunica, Mississippi. Tunica County, Mississippi, began seeing the development of a casino industry in the early 1990s. The state legislature passed a law that legalized gambling on the waterways of the Gulf Coast and the navigable streams of the Mississippi River. Tunica County pursued the industry aggressively, and with its proximity to the Memphis population, and its international airport on the city's south side, Tunica's riverfront saw phenomenal development. There are more hotel beds in Tunica County today than in Jackson, the capital. Ironically, Tunica County was once heralded in a CBS News segment as one of the country's poorest counties. Jesse Jackson was among a parade of journalists and observers who toured a neighborhood there that was plagued by raw sewage in open ditches. Reverend Jackson called Tunica "America's Ethiopia." Statistically, the county is now among Mississippi's richest in terms of economic activity. The casino industry has afforded many jobs for a region that is known for its chronic unemployment. Many of the county's casinos offer shuttle service—at a fee—for its employees as far away as Bolivar County (Schwarz 1996).

Erica worked as a cocktail waitress at the Sam's Town Casino for nearly two years before giving it up. The work was difficult and the long commute became too great a burden. She also expressed some concern for the lifestyle that such work brought with it. She spoke of a fellow cocktail server who had been reprimanded several times by her supervisor for allowing casino patrons to touch her in an inappropriate manner. Erica explained that a server could increase her tips dramatically by allowing patrons to place a hand on her arm or shoulder as they deliver the patron's drink. Erica admits to allowing a limited amount of this behavior, but that she would never allow it to progress to the point that her friend allowed.

Erica describes herself as a "nosy" person, and that this personality trait has given her some incredible insights into the lives of many of the casino's guests. As an example, Erica claims to know a pornographic video "star," who lives outside of Mississippi, that visits the casino often. "He does most of his filming with his girlfriends," she comments. "I just want to know everything, so I made up a story" she continues. "I told him that I was considering stripping, and he gave me his card," she confesses. Erica met the man at a private party held in one of the casino's "bunkers." Such parties can yield the cocktail servers a three-dollar tip on every drink, and she can make between three hundred and five hundred dollars in a single evening. She says that the man was dressed like a pimp, and of the women, "You can just tell them girls. They are around eighteen years old and they mostly come from broken homes." I cannot help but wonder if Erica sees herself in the eyes of these girls, and if she tells me the complete truth about the film star.

Erica is aware that she is different from most of the girls her age in the Delta. "People look at me and know I'm not from here," she confesses. She is certain of her talents and acknowledges that the casino is no career, and that she sees many young girls who have become seduced by the money and have given up on school. Erica wants to have a respectable job. "I want to have my own office and I want to be in charge," she says with a mix of longing and certainty that it will happen. Erica has a boyfriend who wants the two of them to move to Atlanta after she graduates. She is adamant that she does not want to stay in the Delta. "They're ain't anything here but the casinos, and you can't do that for the rest of your life," she argues.

Janice Brown

In one of the more unusual encounters that occurred during my research, I kept up an E-mail correspondence with a woman who was thinking about returning to Rosedale, Mississippi, the historic river town in Bolivar County. Rosedale was once the economic core of the county, before the ascendance of Cleveland to the east, and its rail and highway lines. Janice Brown lives in Madison, Wisconsin, and left the Delta almost ten years ago, but is considering returning home. Her migration story is not the common tale of return migration in that her initial out migration happened after return migration became the dominant net flow of African Americans for the South as a whole. Nevertheless, the themes that surround Ms. Brown's migration decisions have much in common with the larger themes of black return migration to the Delta.

Janice's story is different than other return migrants I have spoken with. She is drawn to her home in the Delta, and she longs to be near her family there. In addition, she feels a calling to help the poor and needy in the region. She does, however, have

reservations about moving back to Rosedale, in the center of the Delta. Instead, she mentions that she would like to move near the border of Mississippi and Tennessee, in the urban periphery of Memphis. Memphis has grown greatly in recent decades so that the extreme north Delta has become an effective suburb of the city. The recent development of Tunica County casinos has increased this development exponentially, since much of the casino's market is tied to the Memphis market (Schwarz 1996). Walls, Mississippi, a hamlet in De Soto County (Walls is in De Soto's western half, that lies in Delta's alluvial plain), now has several fine apartment complexes and newly constructed neighborhoods. De Soto is within the PUMA that contains the north Delta region. In one E-mail, Janice wrote a short narrative concerning her migration experience and plans for the future. The message below is an exact transcription of that message:

Like the English folks would say, "Hi Rob ole Boy"

Good to hear from you. I thought you may have gone on vacation. I went on a two day vacation last in MN, Mall of America. I had a great time. I felt free and relived.

I have been very busy doing child care in my home. When I returned from Mississippi, I decided not to work for any agency. I need quick money to return home. I put my name on the market and I became overwhelmed with many parents wanting me to watch their children. I must say I racked up in the month of September which was the first month my day care opened.

I have many plans when I move back to help parents and children.

To answer your questions:

I left the Delta August 1985. I was pregnant. Hey I had to go. I was feeling helpless. I already had two children.

The story goes:

My brothers was visiting at the time. I had made up my mind to leave and know one was going to hold me back. Not even my father. I did not care if anyone

did not want me to come to Madison. I told my brothers I am going back with them whether they liked it or not. Silence took hold.

With this decision, I hurt my father badly. I was thirty years old at the time and he did not want to give me up. I told him the "hell" with what he thinks. That was the first time I ever spoke to my great father in that tone. I apologized however. Then we were able to express feelings and reasons why I wanted to leave. I told him I love him and that it was not anything personal. He did not fight with me any more, but I know deep down he did not want me to go.

I left my poor dear beloved father. I have no guilt around that because it was time for me to make a move and establish a life for myself. I was tired of being a spoiled brat, getting everything on a silver platter.

I did not really feel frighten in my decision to leave. I had saved about eight hundred dollars to start with.

I lived with my brother and his girl friend for about one month and got my own place. I did o.k. I went back to school around 1987. I did o.k. My brother gave me an old beat up car that made people walk into poles when they saw me coming. That was funny. But hey, currently I am riding in a 1998 Mercury Mountaineer. I have come a long way.

Its been about four years since I wanted to move back home. This was about the time my father had a stroke.

No the North has never been considered my home. Mississippi and especially my residence (family home) has always been my home and will always be my "HOME." The Love, the Memories my father bestowed in my home, I will always cherish.

My plan is not to move back to Rosedale. I plan to settle on the border of TN and MS, in the suburbs. I have to protect my children from as much inner city influence as possible. That will be the more of an ideal thing to do.

At the same time I can travel from Rosedale to Memphis and think about building a center, recruit parents, and people. ECT...

More importantly, to be with my dear mother. She needs me. My brother lives with her. He is a real estate owner. Very established and well off. I have a sister in Greenville that be with mother every weekend. I also have a niece in Memphis that checks on mother quite often. Of course there is Malcolm in Cleveland and other nephews in surrounding areas. But no one have that special bond as my mother and I. A simple example of this: We can lie around and talk about everybody in the family and be tickled to death. But she has nothing to say about me in a bad or ambivalent way.

Would my children like to move to Mississippi? Good question.

My son is fifteen and my youngest daughter is thirteen. It's time to get out of here. They do good and do not get into any trouble. Well motivated kids.

It will be a good thing to move them back closer to their father. My son has some issues around that. Also my daughter. They also has younger and older siblings back home. (Indianola, Mississippi).

My oldest daughter is nineteen has an eleven month old child. Beautiful baby. Just gorgeous. That was a blow at first. I guess that goes with being a parent. She has her own apartment. She is working. Don't know what in the hell she wants to do. Life goes on. I am on a mission and I must carry through. Next time you see Malcolm, tell his I said hi.

Janice's story reveals the problem of defining the return migrant. If she moves to the North Delta, on the urban fringe of Memphis, one might mistake her for a return migrant joining her family in its homeplace. In fact, her decision to move to that location would be more complex. Her decision to move back to the Delta region is related to her desire to be near her family—her mother in Memphis and her father in Rosedale—and her hope to affect some kind of positive social change in the region through her childcare work. Her decision to return to the Delta is tempered by her desire to be near Memphis and her mother, without enduring what she perceives to be the problems associated with the city.

James Eaton

James Eaton came home from Chicago after working for IBM for fourteen years. James has found success in almost every working venture that he has ever attempted. He has a reputation for working hard and being extremely loyal. One key to his success has been his willingness to recognize and accept help from others, usually whites. This career trajectory and his acceptance of the old racial order of the Delta

places him at odds with a younger, more radical, group of black achievers who see his accomplishments as being tainted by what they term “Uncle Tom” behavior.” This behavioral moniker comes from the character in Harriet Beech Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and is used to accuse an African American of solicitous or servile behavior in their interactions with whites.

In the fall of 2000, Mr. Eaton attended a course at Delta State University on the history of the Mississippi Delta. During an early lecture in the course, James made a comment to the instructor and class that social relations in the Delta were not always bad; he argued that whites often helped blacks in their daily struggles and that these interactions often led to deep friendships. Keith Dockery McLean, the widow of cotton planter Joe Rice Dockery, turned in her seat and expressed sincere thanks to James for saying what she had always hoped was the case concerning race relations in the Delta. Keith is not an ordinary Delta matron (I once escorted her to a rally conducted by the Reverend Jesse Jackson); she is as progressive as a woman in her historical position is likely to be. Regardless of her contextual progressivism, she was seduced by James’s comment; they are the words that conservative Delta whites long to hear—words of absolution. One or two young black students in the class, conversely, reacted apoplectically at James’s comment, and all but called him a fool for being so blind to the historic racial realities of the region. James, however, was unwavering in his belief in the goodness of most Delta whites, and only after I learned more about his life story did I realize how deeply white assistance, perhaps paternalism, runs through his family history.

James was born in 1948 in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Not long after he was born, he moved with his siblings to live in Cleveland with his maternal grandmother. James's mother had been working in the fields around Sunflower, Mississippi as a day laborer, but the work became too much for her to bear. James's life has been greatly influenced by women: his mother Ergie Lee Smith, his grandmother Ola Hopkins, and his great-grandmother Lula Hopkins. He is comfortable with women, and in fact, worked for years as a salesman in a women's shoe store in downtown Cleveland, a questionable job for black Delta men, given the region's history of intolerance for physical contact between black men and white women. James and his family moved into his grandparent's house that sat along the railroad tracks south of town. Daddy Slim, his grandfather, whose real name was Nelson, died soon after they moved in. After Daddy Slim's death, they moved out of their railroad housing and bought a house in Cleveland's "low end." James owns that house still and considers it the family homeplace. "Some families move away (from their homeplace), but we always end up back here at this house," he said. We had our longest discussion sitting on the porch of this same house as James smoked one cigarette after another.

Much of James Eaton's attitudes concerning white people's generosity comes from his mother's role as a domestic worker. "My mother was working in white folks's kitchens," he recalls. She once worked for Charlie Capps, who today is the chairman of Mississippi's House Appropriations Committee, making him one of the state's most powerful men. In the 1950s, another of the families that his mother, Ergie Lee, worked for was the Dentons, a family that still operates a thriving dairy products business.

James talks about the Dentons:

I remember very distinctly Mrs. Denton going to Memphis to Goldsmith's and shopping for her children, and shopping for my sister and me at the same time. I remember her always buying us an Easter basket just for us, but she always bought two or three for Joe Junior and them (the Denton children). Well, she didn't want them to have all the candy, so when they got what they wanted out their basket, she'll bring the rest of the baskets over here to us. We had all the candy we could eat. And I remember momma, distinctly, bringing dinner a lot of times, when something goes with our dinner, from over at their house.

Absent from Easton's telling of this situation is any sense of dependence or humiliation that his family had to rely on the generosity of others to meet their basic needs. From James's point of view, the actions by these white employers are based in friendship and caring. One of the historic paradoxes of race relations in the American South is that James is, in part, correct in his appraisal of the interracial relationship. He recalls that when his grandmother, Ora Hopkins, died the family whom she worked for at the time grieved along with him and his family. "The Gurney kids were like our brothers and sisters. When my grandmother died, they had a fit just like we did," he said.

James's father left home when he was five or six years old and went to work in Florida; they lost touch with him after that. Given his family's difficult economic situation, James began working at the age of fourteen. The Saddlers, whom Ora had worked for, owned a restaurant out on Highway 61. "I told Mrs. Saddler that I wanted to work and the agreement was that I could, providing I kept my grades up," he remembers. James would get out of school around four o'clock, and Mrs. Saddler would pick him up (sometimes he would walk) and take him to the restaurant. He worked as a car hop, and people would blow their horn and he would go out to take their order. "I made good money," he playfully boasts, exhaling a cloud of cigarette smoke. When he went to Chicago in the summer to visit his aunts and uncles, he would arrange for a young boy named "C.P." to fill in for him while he was away. They had

the understanding that when he returned at the beginning of the school year, he got his job back. "C.P. was automatically gone," he said. James began his working life as a serious businessperson. Concerning that nature of the job he continues:

Beer was thirty-five cents a can, which means that if I brought you two beers and you gave me a dollar, that means I owe you thirty cents change. Well, they had these little round trays—Budweiser trays. I would put your thirty cents on the tray. Well, I took a little bit of effort to pick up that thirty cents, so in most cases, the thirty cents went to me.

Some nights James would make twenty-five or thirty dollars. He would not, however, give the money to his mother. Instead, he would pay the utility bills and buy clothes for himself and his sister. He points out that his mother was a poor money manager, and that if he had given it to her, she would have wasted it on extravagant food and good furniture. "She'll spend your money, my money, and someone else's money," he wisecracks.

James's experiences with Chicago began early in his life. His grandmother's sisters and brothers came down to the Delta to visit every summer and they would take young James back with them for two weeks or a month. They always drove in a car. When he became old enough, he would take these opportunities in Chicago to work, and make better money than he could as a carhop in the Delta. He found a job with J.J. Hackett Corporation, a business that made punch cards for data systems. The owner was so fond of James and the job he did that he held his position for him year after year. Mr. Hackett had left a position at IBM to start the business, but maintained his contacts and friendships there. Hackett was instrumental in helping James secure a job at IBM after he left Morehouse College in 1971. It was Mr. Hackett, in fact, who had encouraged James to go to college, when he had expressed little interest in the prospects

of higher education. Eaton did not graduate; he left Atlanta and Morehouse after three years. "I was just tired of school," James confesses.

Eaton's position was part of what James recalls was an affirmative action program. "They had to hire 'x' number of black folks in certain positions and I filled the last quota job," he explains. He went to work under a manager named Bill Burns, a white man who became a close friend of James's. Bill was from South Carolina and James believes that the two of them got along well because they were both Southerners. "I guess 'cause we were both Southerners, we were always trying to defend something," he offers. James explained that each time Bill would get a promotion or was moved, he would be promoted or moved as well. After several years, Bill's wife convinced him to return to their native South Carolina, and Bill saw to it that James was in line to get a good management position. Bill Burns told James, "I am going to try and find you a position that will take you through from now on." Bill's machinations landed James a job as first line manager. After that job, James went on to become an area office manager. James's responsibilities included the Chicago area and parts of Wisconsin.

The origins of James's return to the Delta are rooted in David Harvey's critique of late twentieth century flexible capitalism. IBM went through a wave of downsizing in the 1980s, and after his position was targeted for elimination, James accepted a sizeable buy off package. This allowed him to open an antique shop, something he had always been interested in pursuing. Some friends of his helped him write a business proposal and he secured a loan to open his shop.

Two years later, tragedy struck. A car hit James while he was walking across a city street. One leg was badly mangled, leaving him handicapped, and requiring a cane

to get around. At the time, he owned and lived on the third floor of a “three flat.” The woman on the first floor had sold the building to him, and she had written into the agreement that she could live there, on the first floor, until she died. “So there was no chance that I would be living on the first floor and no way I could climb three flights of stairs comfortably, so I just rented it out and decided I was going to come back to Mississippi.”

James stayed in Chicago for a few years after the accident. His mother began begging him to come home immediately after he was hurt. He came home in the late 1980s and bought a large house in Shaw, Mississippi, eight miles south of Cleveland. He owns the family homeplace still, but decided that it was not large enough for all of the antiques that he has accumulated over the years. He lives on Shaw’s main street that rests on the banks of Deer Creek. The beautiful houses on Main Street once belonged to Shaw’s white middle class, but African Americans have purchased them all in recent years. Because of his injury, James cannot drive a car, and must rely on the kindness of others to get around.

Riley Cain

Since I began fieldwork on this project, I have encountered black return migrants in the most unlikely of places. One morning I was in Clarksdale, sitting in a crowded waiting room, hoping to see my doctor. The room had several institutional chairs lining the walls, and there were a few end tables covered in magazines: *Field and Stream*, *People*, *The New Yorker*. I noticed sitting across from me a rather young black man, a young looking woman I assumed was his mother, and a quiet, slender man with a clean-shaven head. The boy—a man child—spoke in animated jabs of speech that

made less and less sense the more I listened. At some point, I fell into conversation with the woman and learned that her son suffers from schizophrenia, and that he was at the clinic that morning to receive treatment. The boy became increasingly angry the longer he had to wait to see his doctor, but his mother provided a soothing counterbalance to his ravings, which seemed to keep him in check. Eventually, the boy and his mother were called back into the examining room and I was left alone in the waiting room with the quiet man.

I have developed the habit of asking certain questions when I meet African Americans in the Mississippi Delta. As I chatted with him, I asked him if he was a native of the Delta, to which he replied, "Yes." I followed with my inevitable research question, "Have you always lived in the Delta?" He answered that he had not, and that he had returned from Missouri in 1990. I explained to him my writing project and asked him if he minded my asking him a few questions about his life and migration history. He did not mind, and I found a pen and some paper at the receptionist's window.

Riley Cain was born in 1951 and spent his youth in the Friars Point area. Friars Point is a river town in Coahoma County, not far from the Tunica County line. Friars Point, like many river port towns, has a reputation as being a haven for roustabouts and hard drinking gamblers. Bluesman Robert Johnson evokes the spirit of Friars Point in his song, *Traveling Riverside Blues*:

If your man get personal, want you to have your fun
 If your man get personal, want you to have your fun
 Best come on back to Friars Point, mama, and barrelhouse all night long.

I got women's in Vicksburg, clean on into Tennessee
 I got women's in Vicksburg, clean on into Tennessee

But my Friars Point rider, now, hops all over me.

Now you can squeeze my lemon 'til the juice run down my...

(spoken: 'til the juice run down my leg, baby,
you know what I'm talkin' about)

You can squeeze my lemon 'til the juice run down my leg

(spoken: That's what I'm talkin' 'bout, now)

But I'm goin' back to Friars Point, if I be rockin' to my head

One Saturday afternoon in 1970, Riley and his mother had gone to town to shop and to greet friends. Riley was playing billiards in a saloon while his mother had gone in another direction; Friars Point is not a large town. Riley knew at the time that his mother was involved in an extramarital affair with another man, but he had no way of knowing that it would put her in her grave that day.

While he and another young man were focused on the green felt and shiny balls sliding peacefully about, caroming off the pads and cracking into one another, someone burst into the saloon and shouted to Riley that his mother had been shot. He ran down the street and around the corner and saw his mother lying in a pool of blood. Riley's voice was almost emotionless, as if he were describing a movie he had seen, while he recalled, "She died right there in my arms. The last thing she said to me before she died was, 'It's gonna be all right.'" Soon after the incident, Riley left the Delta, bound for St. Louis.

He was not in St. Louis for long before he says, "I fell in with a bad crowd." He began to commit various crimes, all of which he claims were of a non-violent nature. He got involved with hard drugs and eventually was arrested for stealing cars, for which he went to the Missouri state penitentiary at Jefferson City. He went in on September 29, 1979 and stayed for twenty years. He said that, in prison, they identified him early on as a country boy from the South. He smiles and offers, "Yea, they called me a

country ass motherfucker.” The day I met him, he had been out for a few months. When he got out, he came home to Clarksdale to be near his family. He has a sister in the Delta, and he lives with his nephew. He is looking for a job as a cook.

To Riley, the Delta of the year 2001 does not resemble the Delta he fled in 1970. “It’s like a baby city down here in the country,” he muses. He explains his comment by pointing to “dope, and gang bangin’” in the Delta. He believes that young people come here from large cities like St. Louis and Chicago and bring with them their gang organizations, weapons, and drugs. Riley has two friends, “my partners,” who have died as a result of their addiction to crack cocaine. I ask him if he has considered finding a way to share his experiences with lawlessness and incarceration, but he quickly demurs by saying, “They ain’t gone listen. That dope is fast money.” In his opinion, the roots of many of the Delta’s problems (particularly the Clarksdale area) are the casinos nearby. He hopes to get a place in the country, and he vows that he will never go back to the city.

Conclusion

The people included in this chapter are a varied lot. From an impoverished blues singer, to a wealthy company man, these informants present the full demographic range that characterizes black return migration to the South. The themes that bind them have to do with place and familial ties to place. All have a long history with the Delta, and each has arrived at a point in their lives where they felt compelled to return to their homeplace. The details of their stories are unique, but each is set with the Delta as a dramatic backdrop. Perhaps the Delta is more like a character than a backdrop in that a backdrop merely provides an aesthetic coloring to a story, a coloring that may be

universal in its meaning. Shakespeare, for example has been staged for centuries in any number of temporal and historical settings. A recent film adaptation created a twentieth century urban American tale out of Romeo and Juliet, with no apparent detracting from the story. Black return migration to the Delta, on the other hand, addresses the Delta not only as a place, but also as a character. The place bears a regional meaning that is particular to African Americans, and as such, is a part of how their lives have been lived and how they have made sense of themselves.

In each of the stories in this chapter, the returnee (or a returnee's ancestor) left the Delta for a reason that was related to race, even if only tangentially. Some, like Margaret Block and Johnnie Jones, left the region because they had fought for too long against racial injustice and felt that they needed to leave in order to live whole lives. Others, like Wavon and Bettye Morgan, left in search of economic opportunity. Nevertheless, in this latter case, economic motivations cannot be severed from racial ones. Economic prospects have long been bleak for blacks in the Delta. A white man of Wavon Morgan's talents and intelligence would likely have had little difficulty in finding financial and professional success in the Mississippi Delta, yet for Wavon, that success came easier outside the region. Ultimately, each of the returnees in this dissertation is faced with returning to a region that holds well-defined racial memories for them.

These stories also are intended to illuminate some of the lived experiences that are hinted at in census data. Researchers are fortunate to have access to detailed data like the Census Bureau's PUMS. The data are not abstract, but are real outlines of real households. I am curious, however, about the life stories that are hidden behind the

tables. What, for example, would a PUMS table of Margaret Block's household look like? She would be classified as a returnee since she lived in California in 1990, but now resides in the Delta. Her advancing age would appear, as would her comfortable income level. What of SNCC? What of her decision to return home to care for her mother, or the fact that she lives in the same house that her great grandfather built? I believe that these are more than details. I believe that these stories give one a deeper appreciation for the larger migration process. As one becomes acquainted with their stories, one begins to sense a deeper regional meaning in the phenomenon, and it becomes evident that patterns in African American culture are having an impact on the migration.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Black return migration to the American South is a phenomenon that is in the process of changing the nature of the African American experience. For decades, observers within and outside the black community believed that the Great Black Migration was a process by which blacks were turning their backs on their traditional region. This thinking acknowledged the fact that African Americans were involuntary immigrants to that region, and that that region, and its social and political power structure, had designed a system to keep blacks in a subservient role, a role that had the effect of providing white supremacists with cheap subjugated labor, and positions of power and domination. Mechanization took away the African American role as the region's primary source of cheap labor. By the late 1940s, rural black laborers were rapidly being displaced by tractors and combines. A handful of farm operators could do the work of scores of black men and women. Blacks had lost their niche in the regional economy, resulting in mass exodus. There was no reason to think that these migrants, or refugees, would forget their homeplaces, or that they would sever the ties that bound them to family and friends left behind, but the era's metanarrative held that these ties would grow weaker over time; they did not.

As I demonstrated in Chapter Four, as many as nine million African Americans sought economic and social refuge in the North and West, most choosing urban centers for the economic opportunities present there. As the 1960s came to a close, just as the last vestiges of the sharecropping system were being erased from the rural South, the

tide of black out-migration from the South began to slow, and blacks began to move southward, turning toward home. Many blacks have not gone home in the strictest sense of the word in that they have found new economic opportunities in the South's strongest economic places. Atlanta, Birmingham, Charlotte, and New Orleans are a few examples. While these migrants have begun to deal with the South all over again, many symbols and indicators of the Old South, and the Old New South, have faded into memory. Most Southern states have dealt with their legacies in one way or another. South Carolina recently removed the Confederate battle flag from its capital dome, while the Georgia legislature is contemplating seriously the removal of that same symbol from its state flag. Even the ever recalcitrant state of Mississippi is taking decisive steps toward removing the Confederate symbol from its flag. In the end, however, black migrants to Atlanta or Columbia, South Carolina are similar to other people who are moving into the Sun Belt to find new work. Black migrants to the rural South are another story.

African American return migration to the rural South confounds economic analysis. Much of what has been written about the Great Return Migration focuses on the urban South. These urban-oriented scholars argue—no doubt correctly—that this migration has financial incentives at its core. But what about return migration to a place like the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, a pocket of persistent poverty in Mississippi? Economic models that concentrate on rational economic decision-making do not explain this segment of black return migration. Certainly, economic factors are a consideration; basic sustenance is an issue for every person. In this case, however, economic matters take a secondary role to what the migrant believes is his or her primary mission or

project. In most cases, this is a decision based on prior connections to place and the attraction of home and family.

I chose the Mississippi Delta as a case study for several reasons. One reason is that the Delta consistently has been one of the poorest regions in the United States. Estimates from 1998 indicate that the ten core Delta counties combine for a median household income of 19,786 dollars, compared to the Mississippi state mean of 28,527, and the national mean of 37,005. In addition, a shocking 37 percent of the Delta's children live under the poverty level. There scarcely could be an American region less likely to see in-migration based on positive economic motivations. The other reason I chose to focus on the region is that the Delta is America's largest contiguous area of majority black population, and as such, is an ideal place to judge black attitudes concerning home, place, and migration. The core Delta region is sixty-five percent African American.

Based on my research in this project, I believe that there are two important factors that are contributing to continued return migration of blacks to the Mississippi Delta: the attraction of home and its attendant responsibilities and support system, and the decay of America's industrial regions caused by reorganization in American capitalism. The stories found in Chapter Five show a few examples of how individuals with a history in the Delta can be induced to return. Ailing parents, job loss, and simple homesickness can bring about return migration. In addition, the urban North and West are becoming increasingly unlivable, according to many accounts. Return migration to the Delta has become a movement of people that most Deltans recognize. Between 1985 and 1990, almost 3,000 African Americans returned to their homeplace in the

Delta. Data presented in Chapter Four suggest also that 87 percent of all black migrants into the Delta (1985 through 1990) were actual—or linked—migrants. This figure is likely larger when one considers that census data is an imperfect tool in ascertaining the family and place history of migrants.

One of the notable findings brought out in this dissertation comes from a sample taken from the Census Bureau's Public use Micro Data Sample. Detailed demographic analysis from PUMS, reveals black return migrants to the Mississippi Delta to be a diverse group of people. In sum, one can take as fact the words of the African American man who told me, "Everybody comin' home." In fact the migration includes representatives from all age cohorts, education levels, gender, and income groups. Certain observable, though minor, biases do exist, however, in the Delta return migrant group. The group shows a slightly larger representation of women than one normally expects among migrants, and the migrants are relatively poor when compared to Americans as a whole, though slightly better off financially than stayers in the Delta. In addition, education levels among black return migrants to the Delta are lower than one observes among the American population as a whole, or the extant Delta population. These demographic anomalies must be viewed, however, in relation to the Delta's black population as a whole. That population tends to be poorer, less educated, and female-dominated in comparison to the country as a whole. Therefore, one might expect its returnees, to reveal those same qualities. A view of the return migrant population shows that it has retained the identity of the people that were left behind, and the descendents of those who were left behind.

This observation raises a fascinating issue. Was black migration from the Mississippi Delta an unsuccessful endeavor, if the migration is viewed in terms of economic well-being and social stability? Granted, I have gone to great lengths in this project to suggest that there is a beauty and humane quality to non-economic migration to a homeplace, but I do not mean to suggest that there is anything romantic or wholesome about poverty. If a family is to live up to its full potential of happiness and success, it is vital for that family's basic needs to be met. One ought to note that the group under consideration here, African Americans, is a group that is significantly poorer than the nation taken as a whole. If black return migration to the Mississippi Delta is but a segment of a black return migration to the South as whole then how does this sub-sample of return migrants compare to those to other regions? The search for an answer to this question may provide the basis for another research project.

Almost every return migrant I spoke with commented that one of the reasons they moved home to the Delta was that the city (Northern or Western) had become too difficult to endure. Since the latter days of the Great Black Migration in the late 1960s, the former North American Manufacturing Core has undergone a dramatic reversal in fortune. Industrial centers that once provided jobs to millions of immigrants, black and white, from the rural South and Appalachia, have decayed and endured a significant reduction in productive output. Much of this economic reversal is related to the growth of America's postindustrial services and information-oriented economy. American firms have moved many manufacturing facilities to the developing world. Mexico's Maquiladoras region, along the United States border, has seen exponential growth in United States-owned factories. The new, more flexible, paradigm of early twenty-first

century capitalism responds quickly to changes in labor markets and government regulation, two factors that have pushed manufacturers out of the Midwest and Northeast, into overseas labor markets. The result has been mass layoffs and increasing displacement of factory workers, which may have played a role in community decline and increased urban pathologies in the former Promised Land. For the first time since the beginning of the Great Black Migration, the South—home—began to look like an attractive alternative to city life. The push of urban decay and the pulls of rural life and Southern family have combined to cause many blacks to reconsider old homeplaces as viable options for residence.

This dissertation began with the premise that data such as those discussed above are an integral point of departure for a study involving migration. To this background I added the stories of several black return migrants to the Mississippi Delta through ethnography. A search for some common theme in these stories may be possible, and the illumination of those themes may lead to a minimization of the uniqueness of each tale. Nevertheless, there is benefit to be gained from trying to discern themes in the phenomenon. One theme in these stories is the inescapable fact that the lives of each of these individuals have remained bound to the Mississippi Delta. In some cases, such as that of civil rights activist Margaret Block, the relationship has been less than loving. She risked her life to change the Delta and now believes that much has remained the same. Other return migrants, like bluesman Willie Foster, love the Delta and could not conceive of living anywhere else. For good or bad, the Delta has been a constant—perhaps a kind of geographic family member—for each of these return migrants. I believe that the same attachment to the Delta is true for sons and daughters of the region

who have not returned to the Delta. Recently I met an elderly African American man in the waiting room of an ophthalmologist's office who was escorting his mother on her visit. I guessed from his clothing—tinted glasses, multi-colored cotton sweater, and loafers—that he was not a lifelong resident of the Delta, but that his mother was. Through a brief conversation I learned that he was born in Winstonville, Mississippi, in north Bolivar County, and that after a stint in the Army, he settled in Northern California. He explained that he visited his mother in the Delta often, but that he did not believe he would ever move back to stay. "I've got my business, and all my kids live out there," he explained. He is, however, linked to the region through history and kinship. The Delta is a part of who he is.

Many of the stories of return migration that I have heard over the last few years have an element of pathos woven within them. Jesse Stanton and Johnnie Jones are left alone in a land that they do not know. Most ironically, Dorothy Scott had a serious encounter with violence in Chicago that brought her to the decision to return to her land in her native Delta. After a few years, her life there became mired in grinding poverty, and her life ended in violent death—sixty-three dollars for a drug addict in exchange for her life. Not all the stories contained in this project, however, are so hopeless. Willie Foster is playing the music he always loved, and he has recorded three albums since returning to the Delta. As a blues musician, living in the Delta brings with it authenticity that St. Louis does not. Foster's move entails a positive gain in place utility, in addition to bringing him to the "dirt that I come out of." Margaret Block has become a bit of a celebrity in the academic community in Cleveland, Mississippi, (in

part because of this project), and she has become a fixture at campus and community events.

For those individuals who have found their return to be a negative experience, there is a temptation to see their return as part of an African American rootlessness. Blacks were brought to this country against their will. Many migrated into the Delta in the nineteenth century to find independence through farm tenancy, only to experience subservience, and often peonage. For these black Americans, the Great Black Migration out of the South was a search for work and respect; neither came easily or was guaranteed to last. Their return migration to the Delta seems ludicrous when seen in this light, in that many wound up back where they had started (perhaps a generation or two later) with little to show for their time away. Even for those who found success, like Wavon and Bettye Morgan, their triumphant return to the Delta had its limitations. The largest symbol of the Morgan's success is their magnificent home, a home that Wavon says he paid for in cash. Nevertheless, since they decided to build in the city limits of Cleveland, they met with that city's de facto residential segregation. Their hard-earned money could buy the home, but it could not buy the freedom to build where they wanted without the stigma of being denied basic human dignity and respect. Ultimately, they too are rootless, in that they are not truly free.

That the Great Return Migration affects places like the Mississippi Delta, as well as places like Atlanta and Birmingham, attests to its regional significance. The migration cannot be dismissed as simply a function of regional economic cycles, although these cycles have had a role to play in the process. Black return migration is more basic and central to the African American experience than economic geography; it

is intimately connected to African American cultural history. August Wilson notes through his writing that the American South is an essential component of which black Americans are, and that it has provided a setting for their cultural identity for nearly four hundred years. Such a regional legacy, unique among this people, cannot easily be forsaken.

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VITA

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DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

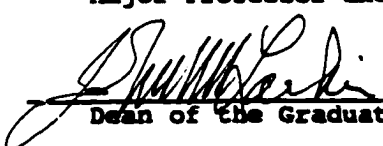
Candidate: Robert Norman Brown, II

Major Field: Geography


Title of Dissertation: Coming Home: Black Return Migration to the
Yazoo-Mississippi Delta


Approved:



Major Professor and Chairman



Dean of the Graduate School

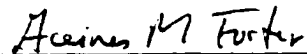
EXAMINING COMMITTEE:











Date of Examination:

3/19/01