PLANTATION GEOGRAPHIES:

AGRICULTURE, RACE, AND SCIENCE IN THE SOUTH CAROLINA LOWCOUNTRY, 1865-PRESENT

by

CLAUDE VICTOR VAN SANT IV

(Under the Direction of NIK HEYNEN)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the racial politics of agriculture in the South Carolina Lowcountry – the coastal region surrounding the port city of Charleston – from the end of slavery to the present. While the region is widely known for its prominent place in the history of American colonialism and slavery, scholars have yet to give much attention to the Lowcountry in the late 19th and 20th centuries. I argue that race and agriculture remain deeply intertwined in the Lowcountry, however, and that the historical geography of this region over the course of the long 20th century reveals several important things. First, it indicates that the articulation of whiteness and agricultural governance remains an important driver of regional politics – now institutionalized and largely unexamined rather than a product of individual intention. Second, it illustrates the ways that ideologies and practices of "improvement" complement more overtly discriminatory processes. Finally, it suggests the extent to which US agricultural governance is informed by the broader project of whiteness.

INDEX WORDS: POLITICAL ECOLOGY, AGRICULTURE, RACE, SCIENCE, US SOUTH, PLANTATION

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

WHITENESS AND AGRICULTURE IN US SETTLER COLONIALISM

One of the most common bumper stickers in the South Carolina Lowcountry, the coastal region surrounding the port city of Charleston, is simply the word "native" with the letter "i" represented by a palmetto tree – the official state tree and a long-standing regional symbol (see figure 1 below). In a place that has historically been represented as "backwards" but has more recently been coveted as the site of extensive tourist and second-home development, this bumper sticker invokes a strong sense of regional pride – at times, surely, a kind of defensive localism. Yet the cachet this bumper sticker communicates carries within it a certain irony, insofar as it appears primarily on cars driven by white people. The paradox of white Americans explicitly self-identifying as "native" in a region that was stolen by Europeans from Native Americans and then reshaped by the labor of enslaved Africans, however, is lost on most. That so many white Americans today overlook this contradiction is a telling example of US whiteness – by which I mean, broadly, the unexamined belief that white is normal (Rasmussen *et al* 2001; Roediger and Esch 2012). And characteristic of whiteness in the post-Civil Rights US more specifically, this commonsense "native" identity also assumes a "pose of innocence" (Mann 2008) – a denial of one's role in the reproduction of historical inequalities.

This dissertation analyzes the intertwined history of whiteness and agriculture in the South Carolina Lowcountry, from the end of slavery into the present day. This history has been a

Figure 1. Popular "Native" bumper sticker.

dramatic one, but I make no claims to regional exceptionalism. The Lowcountry is commonly understood, by both scholars, boosters and the interested public, as a special place. It is envisioned as uniquely historic; granted a prominent role in the broader geographies of the US south, US nation, and the Atlantic World (Coclanis 1989; Yuhl 2005); celebrated as exceptionally beautiful and peaceful (Halfacre 2012); and, along the way, it is frequently granted an essential character. I challenge all of these assumptions in this dissertation. While the Lowcountry is a unique place, like all places, it is crucial to situate the region in its broader historical and geographical context. Thus, while this study focuses on agricultural politics in the Lowcountry, its object of analysis is the broader processes that constitute this regional landscape: the on-going legacies of settler colonialism, the growth of the US agricultural state, and the shifting political rationalities of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These processes are, of course, complex, broad, and dynamic – but there is continuity within this change that reveals the symbiotic relationship between whiteness and agricultural governance in the Lowcountry and beyond. Beginning with the process of "colonization by plantation" employed by the British (as opposed to Spanish colonization founded on the extraction of mineral wealth) Lowcountry whiteness has revolved around claims to regional improvement through "husbandry" of the land (Greeson 2010: 22).

Lowcountry plantations were, like those across the broader British colonial world to which Katherine McKittrick refers, "mapped onto the lands of no one [natives] and became the locations where black people were 'planted' in the Americas – not as members of society but as commodities that would bolster crop economies" (2013:8). McKittrick's recent work on plantation geographies (2006 and 2013) as well as that of Clyde Woods (1998 and 2007) inspire this dissertation's conceptual and methodological arc. Despite their differing approaches –

Woods drawing more on George Beckford's (1971) political economic critique of plantation societies and McKittrick pushing a critical agenda charted by Sylvia Wynter's (1971) radical (post)humanism – together they argue that the plantation remains a powerful ordering force across much of the (post)colonial world. They both also argue that plantation geographies have proliferated much beyond agriculture to characterize various enclosures, mill villages, free-trade zones, urban slums, and more. While these proposed re-territorializations pose provocative questions, my conceptualization focuses more narrowly on tracing the historical-geographies of regional plantation blocs. I also highlight the role of regional improvement projects and processes of subject formation in the reproduction of plantation geographies, illustrating the ways that governance is not only internal to the *plantation* – as Woods suggests (2007: 56) – but also internal to the *self*. At the broadest level this realization suggests that the force of the plantation is not an aberration of liberal democracy, but its continuing effect.

The plantation geographies of the Lowcountry did not end at the close of the US Civil War. Many "slave labor camps," as Peter Wood (1996) suggests we rename historical plantations, are now important tourist destinations and sites for the construction of white identity (Horwitz 1999). Others remain working farms or have been revamped as exclusive hunting preserves. Figure 2 below shows plantation properties circa 1855 and parcel boundaries in 2012 for a portion of Charleston County. More than 150 years since the end of historical slave plantations many of these large property holdings persist, only slightly modified if at all. Beyond this reproduction of literal plantation properties there also remains the continued linkage between "racial violence and the administration of economic growth" that McKittrick argues characterizes plantation geographies (2013: 8). This dissertation examines the role of agricultural governance in the reproduction of Lowcountry plantation geographies.

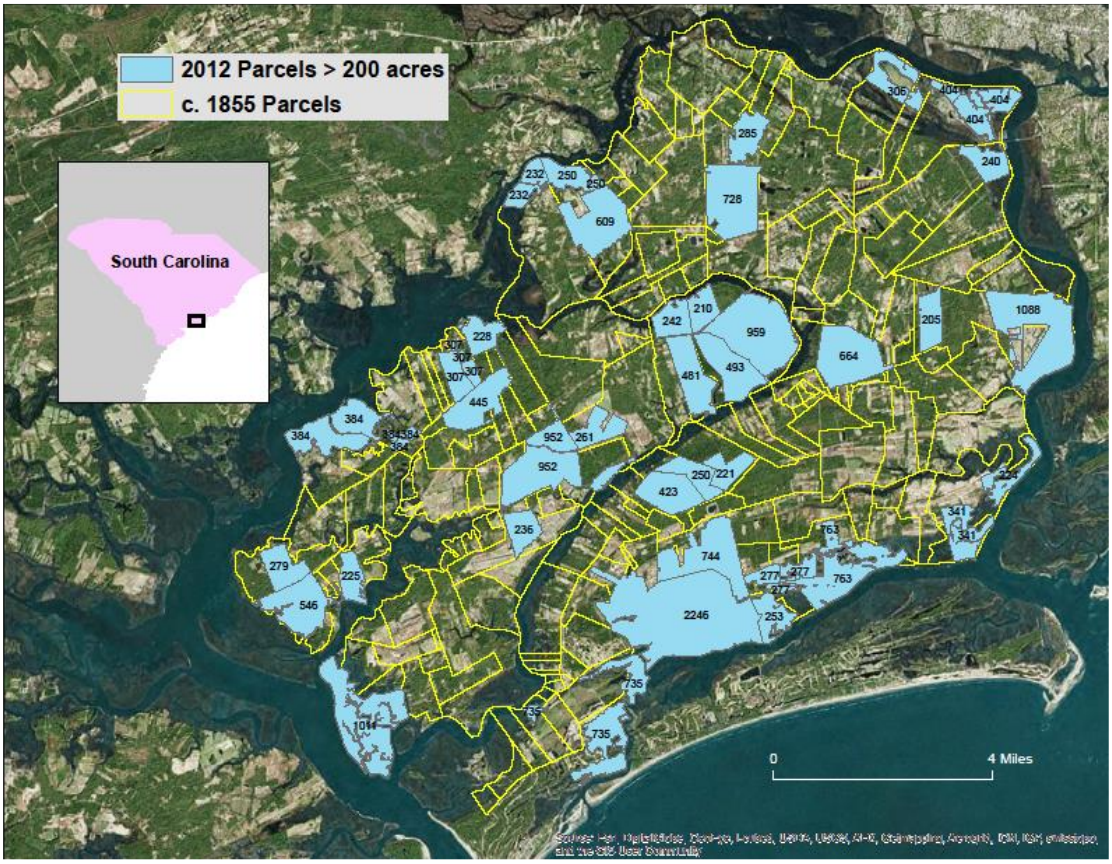

Figure 2. Map showing the persistence of large-scale landholdings on Johns and Wadmalaw Islands in the southern corner of Charleston County, South Carolina. These islands, though experiencing rapid development, remain predominately rural and are arguably the most important agricultural areas in the Lowcountry throughout the cotton and rice plantation system, truck farming, and local-market agriculture.

This introduction first sketches some of the Lowcountry's relevant historical and geographical dynamics in order to prepare the ground for the broadest argument of the dissertation – that the fatal coupling of whiteness and agriculture fertilizes the racialized dispossession at the heart of US settler colonialism.[1] Such a position prompts two interrelated questions: What exactly is "whiteness," and how is it remade through agriculture? In what ways does this dynamic facilitate the white monopolization of land? After introducing the reader to the South Carolina Lowcountry, I will develop a conceptual framework to approach these pressing questions.

Plantation Geographies of the South Carolina Lowcountry

The British dispossession of what is now coastal South Carolina in the 17th century initiated a new historical reality for the region that continues today – one where the politics of land are inseparable from the politics of race. British control of the Lowcountry depended on the extirpation of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans, and this exercise of imperial will shaped a plantation landscape of vast wealth and enduring inequality (Silver 1990; Edelson 2006). Indeed Charleston's 18th century rise to global prominence, as one of the most important nodes of the Atlantic World economy, rested on this system of racial rule (Coclanis 1989).

Racial politics remain central to the shape of the Lowcountry landscape today (Dennis 2000; Carney 2001). From slavery to Jim Crow and into the current era, the region's large African American community has confronted structural racism (Wood 1996; Dusinberre 1996). More recently, Latina/o immigrants and migrant laborers have faced similar challenges. Throughout this long history of racism, control over access to and ownership of land has proven

[1] I draw the evocative notion of a "fatal coupling" from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Geography and Racism" *The Professional Geographer*, 2002.

a central instrument of struggle. In the aftermath of slavery, for instance, African Americans were able to carve out spaces of relative autonomy in the rural Lowcountry and, through a hybrid strategy of subsistence provision and market gardening, built up some of the highest rates of black land ownership in the postbellum US South (Stewart 2002). Land ownership and the relative autonomy that came with it made the Lowcountry a hotspot of black political leadership into the Civil Rights era (Saunders 1980; Carawan 1994; Hahn 2005).

These high rates of landownership, however, began to erode in the 1920s and continue this downward trend into the present (Grabbatin and Stephens 2011). Throughout the 20th century the region was dominated by "truck farming" (a system of fresh vegetable production for distant urban markets). In the early decades of the century poor white and black farmers existed on the margins of the commercial truck industry, even if they did not thrive. But this soon changed. An expansionist tomato agribusiness complex, built on the exploitation of both the people and the sandy Lowcountry soil, was planted in the region following World War II and ranked among the most productive in the world until it crashed dramatically in the 1980s.

While it has been difficult for most Lowcountry farmers to remain economically viable in the post-WWII era, it has been especially difficult for African American farmers. From 1959 to 1982, for instance, the percent decline in African American farm operators in Charleston County was more than double that of their white counterparts. The number of white farm operators showed a significant decline over this span, but the number of black farm operators plummeted to only 13 percent of its 1959 level. Figure 3 shows the dramatic decline in the ratio of black to white farmers in Charleston County over the course of the 20th century. In 1900 there were more

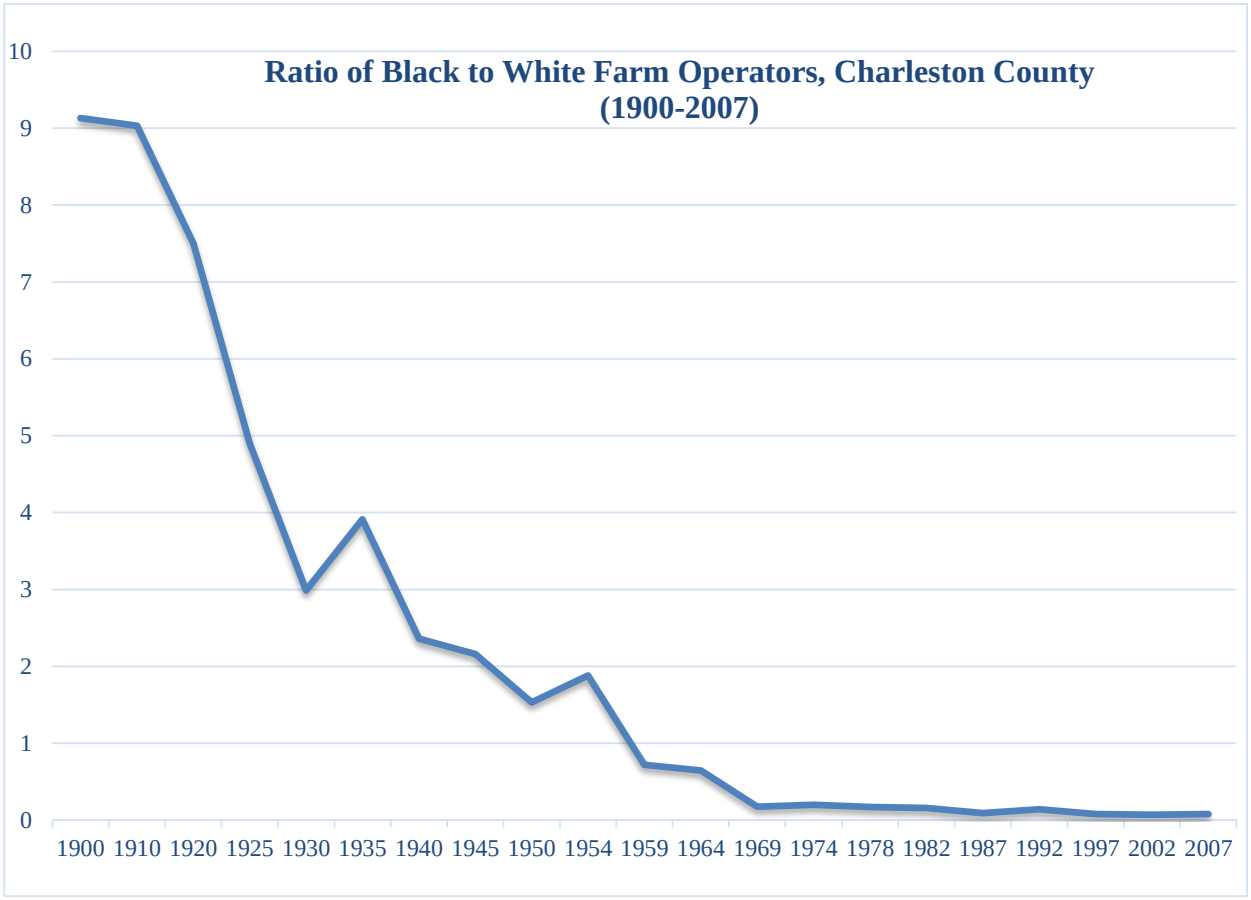

Figure 3. Ratio of black to white farm operators, Charleston County (1900-2007). Source: USDA Census of Agriculture

than 9 black farmers to every one white farmer in the county, but by 1959 black farmers were the minority. Total farm acreage also shows similarly racialized trends which extend to the present: by 2007, 95 percent of farmland in Charleston County was under the control of a white operator (USDA Census of Agriculture).

Systematic and overt discrimination by the USDA facilitated black land loss (*Pigford v. Glickman* 1997; Daniel 2013). The institutional structure of the USDA, one where federal policies and resources are administered by county level committees, suggests that the federal institution is not an "outside" force but one that is actually deeply embedded in, indeed, constituted by, local politics (Woods 2000). Yet the declining importance of agribusiness in the Lowcountry has arguably led to a new role for the USDA. The dramatic decline of the Lowcountry tomato industry, which cost many workers and farmers their livelihoods and prompted several to commit suicide, created a void in the political and ecological fabric of the Lowcountry at the close of the 20th century. In many ways, the most pressing element of this agricultural upheaval was a crisis in regional identity: if the Lowcountry was no longer agricultural, what was it? And, without agriculture, what did it mean to be white? Regional non-profit organizations and enterprising growers have been the most visible leaders of Lowcountry local food systems over the past two decades, and their efforts have rearticulated Lowcountry whiteness through local-market sustainable agriculture. Though the USDA is still a relevant state institution (it maintains complex and dynamic relationships with local non-profit organizations – often contributing significant competitive operations funding, for instance), it is clear that the shift from truck farming to local food systems has also significantly transformed the shape of agricultural governance in the region.

The continuing decline in Lowcountry black land ownership demands that we question the extent to which local agriculture challenges and/or reproduces the region's plantation geographies. As conceptualized above, the core of Lowcountry plantation geographies is the white monopolization of land. Throughout the three broad historical eras of Lowcountry agriculture – slave-based cotton and rice plantations, which were replaced by the commercial truck-farming industry, in turn followed by the small scale local-market agriculture of today – the agricultural landscape has been dominated by white ownership. Plantations (as commonly understood) have, of course, been divided and sold and there has always been a small minority of acreage held by African Americans. Many Lowcountry plantations also, with the help of the agricultural state, made the transition from slavery to commercial vegetable production. Still others profit from today's local food systems. Yet we should not limit our understanding of plantation geographies to large intact tracts of agricultural land once worked by African slaves, or even to large parcels of white-owned agricultural land today. Rather, plantation geographies are the structures that reproduce white monopolization of land, and although they have shifted significantly in the past century and a half they remain firmly in place.

US Agricultural Governance as Settler Colonialism

This dissertation starts by situating black farm loss and regional agricultural governance in the deeper history of US settler colonialism. As distinguished from other forms of imperialism, settler colonialism strives for the elimination, or "disappearance," of indigenous peoples in order to establish a permanent society on the dispossessed land. As Patrick Wolfe aptly describes it, settler colonialism is "a structure not an event" (Wolfe, 2006: 388). Most of the scholarship on US settler colonialism limits its focus to encounters between Europeans and

indigenous peoples, and this is of course the root of the field's area of inquiry (Goldstein 2014). Yet, this is an unnecessarily narrow object of analysis. For if settler colonialism is indeed "a structure not an event," and must be continually reproduced, then many other people and places (such as the South Carolina Lowcountry) remain firmly enmeshed in this structure. One of the resulting limitations to the literature on settler colonialism, then, is a binary framing of "settler vs. native" (Saldana-Portilla 2008). For all of its utility, an overreliance on this framing obscures several important questions about heterogeneity within each of these categories, blurred boundaries between the two, the dynamic existence of other ethnic, racial, and citizenship categories, and more fluid forms of hierarchy in general. Thus, this framing potentially brackets much of the racial politics of US history rather than bringing it into dialogue with indigenous experiences. The resulting conceptual dilemma both reflects and affects popular political struggles – where, for instance, indigenous resistance to colonization is generally seen as separate from African American freedom struggles. While there are, of course, important differences between these two histories (neither of which is singular either) there are also crucial similarities. Most broadly, the oppression of both Native and African Americans has operated through a white normativity that both defines some as subjects of assimilation and exposes others to premature death.[2] While emphasizing the centrality of whiteness runs the risk of defining US racial politics in the terms of its dominant category, rendering the story of race as the story of white people, it does not *necessarily* do so. And it has the ability to illuminate the role of white normativity and nationalist hegemony in the reproduction of hierarchy, highlighting both potential alliances and strategic targets for opposition.[3]

[2] The definition of racism as "exposure to premature death" is from Gilmore, "Fatal Couplings," 2002.
[3] Scholars of whiteness have also recently recognized the need to situate their analyses in the context of imperial histories. See, for instance, Rasmussen *et al* (2001), Shaw (2007), and Roediger and Esch (2011).

While much has changed in the centuries since Europeans first claimed the territory now known as the Lowcountry, the fundamental thread connecting past to present remains the central role of agriculture in reproducing the white monopolization of land – a process that I name "plantation geographies". This conceptualization draws from work in critical whiteness studies on the materiality of identity politics. According to critical legal scholars, the regime of property law instantiated to dispossess Native Americans and enslave Africans did not merely reflect racism but actually produced a property interest in whiteness itself, where property is understood not narrowly as a "thing" but as a right (Harris 1986). Thus as whiteness was encoded in law it moved beyond the realm of self-identity and was transformed into a vested interest. Under this legal regime, the law defined who was white and the legal entitlements (property rights) that stem from that status. As property is the most obvious way that wealth is transferred across generations, this literature offers a provocative framework through which to view the reproduction of racialized inequality in the US. Many of the recent efforts to do so, however, have focused on the ways that the possessive investment in whiteness informs discriminatory US housing policy and residential zoning (Lipsitz 1998; Barraclough 2011). By highlighting similar dynamics at work in the deep history of US agricultural governance and landownership, this dissertation suggests that the materiality of whiteness as property is, on the broadest horizon, best understood as central to the on-going reproduction of settler colonialism.

Conceptualizing the historical geography of the Lowcountry as settler colonialism suggests several important themes and analytical directions. European dispossession of Native Americans relied on not only capitalist conceptions of land as private property but also on notions of racial hierarchy – where "white" was normalized as primary. Each of these precepts gave meaning to the other as they were sutured together through the norms and practices of

"improvement" in the service of territorial expansion (Knobloch 1998). Genealogies of improvement indicate the centrality of agriculture to colonial expansion. In its earliest uses, "improve" signified profit-making operations on the land – specifically, the enclosure of common or wasteland that was fundamental to the instantiation of capitalist social relations (Thompson 1975). This remained the dominant use from the 16th to 18th centuries during the solidification of English agrarian capitalism. By the 18th century the concept signified more broadly an effort to "make something better," a meaning that soon extended into the common use "to improve oneself" (Williams, 1983: 160-61). The notion of "cultivation" also shares this colonial genealogy, and its multiple uses – "to grow crops" and "to nurture personal behaviors" – reinforce the observation that agriculture has long been employed not only to produce food, but also to produce a specific kind of subject (Pandian, 2009). The genealogy of "colonization" indicates the centrality of agricultural "improvement" to dispossession. The root word "colony" was derived from the Latin word for farmer during this same period of expansion in European agrarian capitalism – as landowners dispossessed peasants and privatized the commons. Colonization, as Freida Knobloch succinctly points out, "is about enforcing land ownership through a new agricultural occupation" (1998: 5). In the historical geography of Euro-American agriculture, the idealized farmer was not merely capitalist in the abstract but also "white" (Foley 1999; Roediger and Esch 2012). This a crucial but often overlooked point: agriculture in the Americas rested on notions and practices of improvement that were not only about making a profit off of *land*, but also making a profit off of *race*.

In addition to the blunt force of coercion detailed above, improvement projects are also easily deployed through strategies of consent (Gramsci 1971). They can operate at a wide range of scales: from the individual body to the body politic; from the farm to the regional landscape

and beyond. In fact, improvement projects are often central to the politics of scale, subjecting bodies to broader publics and linking individual farm practices with regional and national governance. As chapter one shows, for instance, the USDA cooperative soil survey aimed to train *individual* farmers so that their collective behavior would cultivate the desired *national* farmscape – one that embodied Eurocentric notions of a progressive civilization. It is also important to recognize the extent to which power blocs rely on improvement projects to construct the consensus necessary for hegemony. As chapter two shows, the growth of state-sponsored agricultural improvement was central to the reproduction of the Lowcountry plantation in the aftermath of the Civil War. Thus, historicizing improvement projects offers valuable insight into the ways that order is reproduced through the always-shifting articulation of ideologies and practices of rule.

Many analyses of improvement assume the modern state as the central character, and this theoretical tendency is borne out in scholarship on US agriculture by an understanding of the USDA as a rather solitary and domineering institution. In contrast, this dissertation will show that the USDA – while undoubtedly a powerful force – has always relied on its position within a network of formally non-state institutions for this power. As chapter two shows, for instance, the improvement projects of the modern agricultural state (at least in the SC Lowcountry) were pre-figured by an 18th century imperial network of "gentleman scientists" (Drayton 2000; Chaplin 1993). The Agricultural Society of South Carolina represented the Lowcountry node of this network and actually recruited the USDA to the region to help resolve the postbellum crisis in the plantation order sparked by emancipation. The Society eventually outsourced, in effect, their improvement work to the agricultural state. The next major crisis in Lowcountry agriculture, roughly a century later (chapter three), was resolved when regional NGOs aligned with the

USDA to facilitate farmer and regional transition from commercial truck farming to local food systems. Thus both of these instances emphasize the need to appreciate the networked nature of US agricultural governance.

The central role, yet dynamic and elusive character, of the USDA also suggests the need to clearly theorize the relationship between race and the state. The state is not, of course, a monolithic or static institution – different functions and agents of the state clearly represent competing interests that shift over time. Yet there are particular imperatives and logics that give an order to the reality abstracted as "the state". This dissertation aims to cultivate a productive tension between fine-grained empirical investigation and analytical abstraction, and this is especially true regarding the racial politics of the state. One of the most obvious forces driving the modern state is the contradictory imperative to simultaneously facilitate capital accumulation and secure its own legitimacy. Yet, much of the scholarship rooted in this tradition fails to recognize the racial dynamics of these imperatives – for capital accumulation and the legitimation of state power are both clearly racialized (Goldberg 2002; Omi and Winant 1994; Pulido 2000). In order to specify the contours of this process, this dissertation historicizes the racial politics of the US *agricultural* state – particularly in times of crisis. Doing so not only reveals the central role that improvement has played in articulating race and state, it also suggests some of the current limitations of scholarly treatments of US agriculture.

One of these is a tendency to understand racism as a matter of intention. Pete Daniel's (2012) canonical work on racial discrimination in southern agriculture, *Dispossession*, while convincingly illustrating the existence of overt racism, also relies on an intentional conception of discrimination. Thus, he highlights the ways that individual racist agents of the USDA failed in their obligations to treat black farmers as equal citizens. In her influential study of the making of

US migrant agricultural labor Cindy Hahamovitch (1997) similarly acknowledges "the depths of racist thought in the United States," but insists that "racism was not the engine that drove the state; federal officials did not devise migrant policy with the intention of suppressing people of color" (12). Given that domestic workers and agricultural laborers (the two segments of the labor market dominated by African Americans) were explicitly excluded from New Deal relief programs at the request of white southern politicians, her claim about the lack of overt discrimination is questionable. More broadly, though, a narrow conceptualization of racism as necessarily intentional obscures important questions about the state's role in the reproduction of racial inequality.

Grappling with the more subtle and unexamined forms of discrimination that mark projects of improvement offers the opportunity to correct these oversights. As framed above, US agricultural improvement has always also been about racial improvement, based on particular norms of whiteness. While not as overt or intentional as some manifestations, the unexamined and discriminatory norms that constitute the improvement projects of the US agricultural state, and agricultural governance more broadly, are just as much an effect of racism and a cause of racial inequality.

It is difficult to uncover individual cases of land dispossession in the 20th century US. Most instances of Lowcountry black land loss are attributable to market mechanisms. Many landowners, for instance, were simply forced to sale due to inability to pay (often discriminatory) property taxes or debts accrued under (predatory) lending (Daniel 2012; Kahrl 2012). Others faced the same predicament after being denied loans and/or market access. There is no recourse for the dispossessed because the discrimination is unintentional, implicit, hidden, or impossible to "prove"; the dispossession is therefore "legal" – just as "legal" as the doctrine of discovery.

Thus, rather than try to prove individual cases of dispossession through the logic of the law and the methods of the courts, this dissertation illustrates the ways in which agricultural governance has promoted whiteness and racial hierarchy under the guise of improvement. This articulation of racial and agricultural improvement provides the essential context for understanding Lowcountry black land loss and the reproduction of US settler colonialism.

Chapter Outlines

Each of the chapters examines the reproduction of plantation geographies in the South Carolina Lowcountry, focusing on different historical moments and modes of governance. The first two chapters examine the decades-long efforts to secure the white monopolization of land in the aftermath of slavery.

Chapter Two situates the Lowcountry in the context of the broader projects of white nationalism as they played out through the US cooperative soil survey. It shows that soil surveys were a crucial tool for land-use planning, of course, and they also embodied the racialized assumptions of Eurocentric agricultural improvement. They promoted a landscape of not only rationalized and market-oriented farms but also of "whitened" ones. The US cooperative soil survey is also important because it was oftentimes, as it was in the Lowcountry, one of the first forays of USDA experts into a region. Thus soil surveys brought farmers into the orbit of state improvement.

Chapter Three examines the growth of the agricultural state in the Lowcountry in more detail, and shows that the region's planters recruited the USDA in order to help resolve the crisis in cotton and rice plantation production. While these crops ultimately failed by the 1920s, the white monopolization of land was secured by USDA promotion of Lowcountry truck farms.

Ultimately, the growth of the USDA established not only large-scale commercial cultivation but the reproduction of Lowcountry plantation geographies. The region's truck farming industry collapsed in the 1980s, but enterprising growers and non-profit organizations soon filled the void with local food systems.

Chapter Four examines the racial politics of improvement employed by the governance institutions of local agriculture, a mode that is characterized by entrepreneurialism and nostalgia. I argue that this specific articulation of "entrepreneurial nostalgia" cultivates a deeply-individualistic and colorblind subject. Furthermore, the growth of local food systems has allowed plantation owners to hold onto their land by providing an opportunity for them to lease to smaller and younger growers, and assembling a high-value market through which to market "heritage".

Regional claims to a rich agricultural heritage have also supported the growth of a strong tourism industry, not only to visit historical plantations but also to dine in high-end restaurants that market a multicultural authenticity. In fact, culinary tourism is arguably the dominant form of travel to the region today. In an effort to reach a broader audience – the liberal "foodie" – with many of the critiques developed throughout the dissertation, chapter 5 examines the racial politics of Lowcountry cuisine. It challenges the claims to a happy multiculturalism by highlighting the exclusive and white-washed nature of Lowcountry culinary myths. Drawing on some recent efforts to re-narrate the region's foodways, it closes by arguing that any truly representative account of Lowcountry cuisine must reckon with the continuing legacies of racialized labor.

The conclusion offers some provisional reflections geared towards abolishing the plantation geographies of the Lowcountry, and beyond. It argues that, amongst other things, efforts to do so must challenge liberal modes of improvement.

CHAPTER 2

“THE LONG-TERM REQUIREMENTS OF THE NATION”: THE US COOPERATIVE SOIL SURVEY AND THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF IMPROVEMENT

Edmund Ruffin was one of the most influential agronomists of the 19th century, "discoverer of the problem of soil acidity and its cure, and the father (arguably) of soil science in the United States" (Kirby 2000: xiii). When his influential *Essay on Calcereous Manures* appeared in 1832 it garnered for Ruffin a reputation that allowed him to retire from agriculture and focus full time on propagandizing for scientific and "permanent" agriculture. In 1842-43 Ruffin served as the chief geologist of South Carolina and performed the first official survey of the state's agricultural soils. According to legend, Edmund Ruffin also fired the first shot of the Civil War on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. As his mythical role in the commencement of the Civil War suggests, Ruffin was also a virulent secessionist: a critic of liberal democracy and a prominent defender of racial slavery. Ruffin asserted the inferiority of Africans and, like his work on agriculture, sought to prove his claims through science (Matthew 2012).

These two personal histories - virulent racist and scientific improver of agriculture - are inseparable. Ruffin's agricultural reform efforts were motivated by his desire to stem the pattern of soil exhaustion and westward migration that were threatening to upend the region's slave society. He promoted scientific agriculture, for instance, by highlighting that slave states lost Congressional power due to population decline in the wake of soil exhaustion and westward migration. Ruffin and other agricultural reformers across the US South feared this trend was a

threat to the perpetuation of slavery in the face of mounting abolition efforts. In an 1852 address to the planters of Charleston, SC, Ruffin warned that soil exhaustion would lead to the "loss and eventual ruin of your country, and humiliation of its people," - and by "people" he meant, of course, the planter class (Kirby, 344). Ruffin's agenda for social and environmental "improvement" draws into sharp relief the many ways that soil is foundational to not only the ecological landscape but also the political one.

This chapter suggests that there is much to gain from renewed attention to the political ecology of soil, by which I mean here, studies of the ways that scientific knowledge about soils is irreducibly entwined with struggles over land. Though the field of political ecology was in many ways founded on an interest in soil (Blaikie, 1985), the subject has eroded from prominence.[4] This is surprising given the on-going concerns posed by military uses of soils knowledge and the increasing ambition of global soil mapping projects (Helms, Effland, Durana, 2002). The United Nations (UN) also recently declared 2015 the "International Year of Soils," indicating the extent to which scientific and governance institutions across the globe have focused their attention on this critical resource. Political ecologists, among many others, also recognize the centrality of soils to the production of food and fiber, matters of public health, and the stability of everyday livelihoods (Zimmerer, 1993; McNeill and Winiwarter, 2010; Engel-Di Mauro, 2014; Sutter, 2015). Despite this awareness, and the fact that the early work of Blaikie and others highlights the importance of the topic, the political ecology of soil remains fertile analytical ground.

[4] Although, see the recent book by Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro (2014) for a similar effort, which rests at the intersection of political ecology and soil science.

As an initial step in rejuvenating the topic, I will examine the role of the US cooperative soil survey in the nation's agricultural history. Although historians and political economists have consistently and convincingly highlighted the role of science in the homogenization and centralization of US agriculture (Fitzgerald, 2012; Kloppenburg, 2005), they have yet to turn their attention to *soil* science. Soil surveys, though, as synoptic technologies of visualization and simplification, are arguably one of the most powerful tools available to modern states in their efforts to administer territories and populations (see figure 4 below). Agricultural governance, for instance, is never solely about the production of food and fiber but is much more broadly utilized for *the production of order*. And, as the work of Edmund Ruffin reminds us, since the arrival of Europeans in North America the governance of land has been just as much a racial project as a political economic one (Knobloch 1996; Chang 2010). Thus, this essay argues that the US cooperative soil survey is best understood not simply as a tool of the state but more specifically as a technology central to the project of white nationalism.

The national soil survey was founded in 1899, as xenophobic reactions to increased immigration and white anxiety over "the closing of the frontier" served to more firmly intertwine racial fears and national land politics (see, for instance, Kosek 2004). This historical context proved crucial, for it decisively articulated the survey to commonsense notions of white superiority and desires for a "pure" national landscape – a move that was accomplished primarily through the language and practice of "improvement". In the context of the US soil survey, the drive to improvement is manifest in scientists' normative understanding of who counted as a "successful" farmer, what constituted "improved" land use, and the "proper" methods to create such a national landscape. The survey also functioned as an early tool for the authorization of

Figure 4. Composite Soil Map of the US, Atlas of American Agriculture, USDA, 1931.

state agricultural expertise, establishing a role for USDA officials as intermediaries between farmers and the soil.

Politics, Soils and Expertise

There is much at stake in a return to the political ecology of soil. In addition to the ethical questions raised by military soil science and global surveying projects, a renewed political ecology of soil offers an opportunity to inject some of the most pressing concerns of recent scholarship into one of the foundational discussions of the field. Blaikie's germinal study of *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* (1985) not only emphasized the central role of soil in the "dialectical relationships between people and nature," (115) but also developed a framework that influenced a generation (at least) of political ecologists. Though many political ecologists have maintained an interest in soil, they tend to follow Blaikie's initial path quite strictly. Soil erosion and degradation, for instance, remain the central points of inquiry for studies that build on Blaikie's insights. Much of this work is also focused on Sub-Saharan Africa and reads racial politics - if at all - through the lens of world systems theory (Beinart 1984, Bell and Roberts 1991, Kiage 2013). Although immensely productive, this common theoretical grounding and topical focus leaves many other aspects of soils unexamined.[5]

More broadly, while recent studies in this vein have refined the "rudimentary conception of power" employed in *Political Economy of Soil Erosion* (see, for instance, Engel-Di Mauro 2006 and 2014), there remains a need to analyze the racial politics of soil science.[6] It is perhaps

[5] Engel-Di Mauro (2014) echoes the point that critical studies of soil have been too narrowly focused on erosion, but does so in order to argue for studies of other forms of degradation (soil compaction, etc).
[6] The quote about Blaikie's conception of power is from, Robbins and Bishop, 2008: 754.

not surprising that Blaikie paid little attention to racial politics (given the marginal and nascent status of such inquiries at the time), yet growing recognition of the need for this type of work should encourage scholars to revisit the foundations of political ecology in the spirit of radical reconstruction. There is both a strong groundwork laid for the political ecology of soil and several promising new directions for the field.

While a full review of *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion* is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to note several of the work's defining features.[7] First, Blaikie's primary concern is one of causality. In his own succinct words:

> "Soil degradation and erosion is *caused* by the interaction between land use, the natural characteristics of that land and its vegetation, and the erosive forces of water and wind (Stewart, 1970). The focus of this book is upon the social element...The central question asked is *why* certain land-uses take place" (32, emphasis added).

Though he argues that "ideas" matter, they clearly take a back seat in his analysis to a "broadly-defined political economy". It is also arguable that *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion* is "unapologetically structuralist and economistic" (Robbins and Bishop, 752). Consistent with this analytical framework the "principal conclusion" of his work is simple and compelling: "soil erosion in lesser developed countries will not be substantially reduced unless it seriously threatens the accumulation possibilities of the dominant classes" (Blaikie, 1985:147). For all of the critiques leveled at *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion,* Blaikie's framework has distinct advantages, not least among them is the fact that he was able to somewhat broaden the discussion of soil conservation policy in development agencies by convincingly tying capital to

[7] See especially the 2008 *Geoforum* special issue, "In honor of the life work of Piers Blaikie in Political Ecology and Development Studies," 39: 687-772.

degradation. Yet there is also a need to move the political ecology of soil beyond the causes of soil degradation.

Drawing from and contributing to the work of feminist scholars, Frieda Knobloch (1996) argues that too narrow a focus on causation can obscure multiple forms of domination (by focusing solely on class, for instance). Thus, the object of analysis in this essay is not causation *per se* but the variety and forms of power, "not the determination of history but its overdetermination" (Knobloch 11). Paralleling broader trends in the field (Goldman, Nadasdy, and Turner, 2010), a consistent focus on the politics of knowledge can reorient the political ecology of soil towards these new questions. Bruce Braun's (2000) study of the ways that Canadian geological surveys in the late 19th century not only served the expansion of the colonial state but also shaped the production of a national nature is in many ways a provocative starting point for rejuvenating the political ecology of soil. Whereas Braun shows the central role of the geological sciences in the initial European settlement of colonial territories, this chapter will emphasize the ways that US soil science and soil surveys are easily-articulated to the ongoing reproduction of white nationalism. The next section will review the literature in political ecology on "expert" knowledge, and argues that more attention needs to be paid to the *articulation* of these knowledges with other ideological and epistemic traditions - particularly racial politics (Hall 1996).

Political Ecology and Expert Knowledge

The politics of environmental knowledge has emerged over the past decade and more as one of the most important and revealing themes in critical studies of human/environment relations (Peet and Watts 1996 and 2004). Indeed, it is arguable that pulling on this thread has

been the dominant task of political ecologists since the work of first generation scholars like Piers Blaikie. In many ways, this theme was popularized by James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1999), which argues, of course, that the rise of the modern state depends on the growth of synoptic ways of knowing and bureaucratic forms of organization. Political ecologists and many others have used these insights to great effect, and they offer a compelling way to understand the US cooperative soil survey.[8] Yet by insisting on the importance of racial politics, this chapter also employs an important reworking of Scott's framework. While a full review of *Seeing Like a State* is unnecessary, it is important to note a tendency in this work and those that follow a similar path to understand high modernist ideology in rather monolithic and isolated terms.[9] This conceptualization fails to capture the ways that homogenizing systems of knowledge are always informed by and articulated with other epistemic and ideological traditions.

The explicitly *racial* ideologies of colonialism are central to understanding the ways that high modernist projects have played out across the globe (Adas 1986). Yet *Seeing Like a State* and other foundational works more explicitly identified as political ecology left these articulations under-examined (Peet and Watts 1996 and 2004; though see Kosek 2004 for a noteworthy exception). While these early examinations of expert knowledge often emphasized the importance of "colonialism," they generally failed to develop the concept beyond its core-periphery connotation. Thus early work in the political ecology of knowledge was ill-equipped to grapple with the multiple and dynamic ideologies that informed both formal colonialism and its aftermath. Feminist political ecologists, however, have done more to emphasize the intersection

[8] Working in a similar tradition, Melanie DuPuis (2002) shows how the normative assumptions about "modern" production embedded in early 20th century agricultural land utilization mapping supported policies that subsequently *produced* that ideal landscape (140-195).
[9] There are several excellent reviews of Scott's book. For instance, Fernando Coronil, "Smelling Like a Market," *American Historical Review*, February 2001, 106(1): 119-129.

of multiple identities and sets of power relations. Rocheleau, *et al* (1996), for instance, argue that "feminist political ecology treats gender as a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, *interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change*..." (4, emphasis added). Drawing from philosophers of science such as Sandra Harding (1986) and Donna Haraway (1988), early work in feminist political ecology approached the question of expert knowledge with more attention to its situated character. As Mollett and Faria (2013) have recently argued, however, there remains in feminist political ecology a "prevailing ambivalence" towards forms of difference other than gender, and a general "paucity of racial inquiry" (119-120). Put simply, the political ecology of soil can push studies rooted in the politics of knowledge further by treating expert knowledge as only one thread in much more complex articulations.

Expert knowledge is generally administered through the language and practice of "improvement" or "development" - notions central to colonial power. Thus revisiting the political ecology of soil with sustained attention to the cultural politics of (post)colonialism opens important new analytical arenas. For the present purpose, such an approach helps frame attention to the articulation of racial and environmental politics. The most compelling recent efforts in this direction highlight the ways that "notions of race and nature themselves *work* as instruments of power" (Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003: 8). The authorization for colonial projects, for instance, was rooted in a conceptual and practical tethering of race and nature, where European officials claimed that "colonial rule required administration of both nature and natives in the tropics; both were resources to be managed, improved, and developed for the benefit of metropole and colony" (ibid 19).

These notions of race and nature are clearly dynamic, thus it is critical to trace their historical and geographical articulations. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, U.S. nationalists continually struggled to create a sense of national identity, one for which individuals would willingly self-sacrifice. As Ladelle McWhorter (2009) shows in her genealogy of Anglo-American oppression, "the nineteenth-century nation thus constructed itself as an organic entity of mythic proportion, a living tradition, a race." Not only did this mythical organic entity transcend the individuals that composed it at any point in time, but with the assimilation of evolutionary theory "the nation became not only a living being but also an evolving being" (197). Thus evolutionary thought was easily grafted onto pre-existing notions of improvement, and together they were fertilized by the authority of scientific racism. This particular form of nationalist racism, as McWhorter reminds us, "enabled a narrative of Anglo-Saxon territorial expansion that made the founding population racially continuous with a national past set in the northernmost regions of Europe. There *was* a nation, the Nordic nation" (198). For many white Americans, evolution dictated that eventually "Indians and the Negroes would be extinct...Nordics would populate as well as own and administer the entire territory" (199). In the meantime, if racial others were to be tolerated they were clearly in need of improvement. Thus the omnipresent talk regarding improvement of "the nation" and "the race", which might seem to suggest an inclusive community (i.e., "the human race"), were at root discussions about solidifying a white nation-state: "*a better human race*," for turn-of-the-century US powerbrokers, "*simply was a whiter human race*" (202, emphasis added).

Agriculture was a particularly potent site for the articulation of race and nature in the early 20th century. The US eugenics movement, for instance, was largely institutionalized through the efforts of agricultural scientists concerned with "the science of breeding"

(Kimmelman 1983). The white supremacist ideology promoted by eugenic science was not only developed in large part by agricultural scientists but also gained a lasting home in agricultural departments at land-grant universities and the cooperative extension service (Glenna, Golnick, and Jones 2007). Thus, at its founding, the US cooperative soil survey was part of a larger state project of "improvement-as-whiteness". Rather than simply promoting some abstract political-economic high-modernism, the soil survey and contemporaneous projects of social and ecological engineering were fundamentally racial projects. The survey, to put it bluntly, was established to improve the national territory and population through methods that were simultaneously agricultural *and* racial.

As a large bureaucratic project it was, as one would expect, contradictory at times. At its founding the soil survey frequently and explicitly promoted white supremacist values, and at other times its racism was much more subtle. Like other improvement projects it was often a deliberate tool of elites, and at other times it worked in an ostensibly more "democratic" way to cultivate the desired national farmscape. The synoptic capabilities of the soil survey, for example, work just as well for the “top-down” planning of regional landscapes by state experts as it does for the more capillary task of training farmers in a specific way of seeing farm management and their place in the nation. As such the history of the US soil survey is marked by one of the fundamental tensions of the modern state: the imperative to facilitate (racialized) accumulation, and to simultaneously legitimate itself. Yet throughout these dual mandates and challenges, whiteness is understood as the norm. Thus, the survey not only defines improved agriculture but also promotes a specific vision of whiteness that hinges on adhering to this understanding of improved agriculture.

As I show here, a more sustained engagement between political ecology and literature on the cultural politics of race and nature provides a rich framework for understanding expert knowledge, and it promises to enrich both areas of inquiry. Such an engagement offers political ecologists robust tools in their efforts to analyze multiple forms of power. For instance, as I argue here, high-modernism and expert knowledge more generally (both central to political ecology's concerns) should be understood as fields constituted by the problematic of improvement, and therefore necessarily involving questions of racialization (Mehta 1999). At the same time, political ecology's insistence on the importance of environmental governance offers an important model to the cultural politics of race and nature tradition, suggesting that some of the most provocative analyses are those which can connect ideological and epistemic politics to everyday livelihood struggles.

The US Cooperative Soil Survey and the Reproduction of White Nationalism

Though some individual states had already started to develop soil survey projects through their agricultural experiment stations (which received federal funding starting in 1887), the founding of the US cooperative soil survey in 1899 marked a massive expansion and centralization of soil mapping, and a period of sustained support for state soil science more broadly. The collaborative program was administered by the Division of Soils within the US Department of Agriculture, but included significant contributions from state agricultural experiment stations, state geological surveys, and other local institutions. This general administrative structure remains in place today.

With new-found institutional support for the national soil survey, the practice of soil science in the US developed rapidly in the early part of the 20th century. In order to complete the

survey, both field and laboratory researchers launched sustained efforts to further classify soils, understand their genesis, and outline the ends to which they could be used. In 1901, for instance, one hundred soil types had been classified; by 1904 the number rose to four hundred; and by 1912 there were one thousand six hundred and fifty classified soil types. Soil scientists also created entirely new levels of classification (soil series and soil provinces, for instance) in order to organize this data and produce the national survey. Though the survey was ostensibly developed for agricultural use, it was not long before others recognized its administrative utility. In 1907, for instance, the Glenn County, California board of supervisors used the soil survey for land appraisal and tax assessment, and by 1912 the National Tax Association endorsed the use of the survey for these purposes (Helms, Effland, and Durana 2002). Despite this early adoption of the survey to non-agricultural ends, many scholars emphasize that agricultural administration was the dominant purpose of the soil survey. The survey was certainly critical for the development of US agriculture, as I argue below, but by focusing solely on its immediate policy justification scholars miss the chance to situate it in its broader historical context.

The US soil survey is a direct product of national anxieties surrounding the purported "closing of the frontier" in the late 19th century. These anxieties are most famously and dramatically expressed, of course, in Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," but were shared by a large swath of the US citizenry. The US Frontier Myth told (and continues to tell) Americans a story of their individual and national creation through the progressive "civilization" of the western wilds. The white male farmer was the central figure in this myth: the hero who purportedly cultivated democracy and established commercial society through rugged individualism (White 1994). For Turner and many white Americans, the closing of the frontier - as signaled by the 1890 census - sparked a

frightening wave of anxiety about the future: if there were no more frontier lands, how could the nation reproduce itself in its own image? Much of this concern centered around white fear of racial "pollution" and the ability to maintain control over the national landscape (Kosek 2004). Explicitly racialized anxieties over the health of the nation dominated not only domestic but also international politics in the post-frontier era, driving US imperialism abroad. Perhaps most obvious among these post-frontier moments of white US imperialism was their acquisition of the Phillipines from the Spanish in 1899, the very same year that the US soil survey was established. Just as with Ruffin's antebellum soil science, "post-frontier" supporters of the US soil survey understood it as one of the most important tools for securing white supremacy and national vitality.

Foundational Logics: Making Nature Produce for the Nation

The US cooperative soil survey was conceived and implemented, first and foremost, as part of a project to *make nature produce for the nation*. By this I mean that the foundational concern for US soil science was to develop the knowledge and technology necessary to securely harness the productive power of nature to the development of the nation. Much of the concern with soil erosion, for instance, should be understood in this light. Franklin Roosevelt perhaps voiced this connection most clearly and concisely in 1937 with regards to the need for a Uniform Soil Conservation Law: "The Nation that destroys its soils," he warned, "destroys itself."[10] Many of the anxieties linking the health of the soil and the health of the nation, however, were

[10] Franklin D. Roosevelt: "Letter to all State Governors on a Uniform Soil Conservation Law," February 26, 1937.Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15373.

institutionalized several decades earlier when Whitney and the Bureau of Soils designed the cooperative soil survey as a technology for national development.

The survey's developmental vision was a very particular one: "*The commercial supremacy of America*," Whitney argued, "can have no safer basis than agricultural independence...it is for this reason that the soil survey is bound to take a prominent part in the development of this country" (1901, 119). Other concerns, such as rural well-being and soil conservation, were valued in this administrative context to the extent that they furthered, in Whitney's words, "*the integrity of the nation*" (quoted in Tyrrell, 133). As Cyril Hopkins warned, "without agriculture America is nothing" (quoted in Tyrrell, 131). The vast majority of early 20th century USDA soils publications justified the study on the grounds that it is "of great importance to the Nation."[11] The "nation" that soil scientists and the broader agricultural state had in mind was an imagined community (Anderson 2006). The normative nation that soil scientists were accountable to and desired to promote was constituted by the mythical frontier heroes: market-oriented and white male-dominated farm owning families. As FDR's quote above indicates, the agricultural state tied the health of "the nations' soils" to the health of this *specific* imagined community. The foundational logics and everyday practice of US soil surveys must be understood in this context, as a part of the on-going project of national "improvement".

The project of national improvement was not merely an "internal" one of creating a more stable and homogenous (read "white" or, at least, "whitened") population. This was desirable on its own for many, but it also held the promise of leading to a nation that could outcompete others in what seemed an increasingly difficult global confrontation. "There has never been a time in

[11] This specific quote is drawn from M.L. Wilson's foreword to the 1964 USDA agricultural economic report no. 85.

the history of the world," Whitney claimed, "when the different nations and communities have contended so strenuously for commercial supremacy, even for commercial existence, as they do to-day" (Whitney 1901, 117). Thus, he positioned the soil survey as a powerful state technology that could enable national commercial success. The internal anxiety sparked by the closing of the frontier coincided with, as Ian Tyrrell describes it, "geopolitical fears that the nation's international comparative advantage in agriculture was being squandered" (Tyrrell 128).

In 1924 Whitney, still the chief of the Bureau of Soils and the national soil survey, gushed that "the soil map is a visualization of the aspirations and desires of mankind [*sic*] throughout the ages" (1924, 411). Figure 5 below shows a contemplative Whitney with a prized US map as backdrop. In its assumption that there is a singular "mankind" that maintains a uniform set of "aspirations and desires" across time and place, Whitney's sweeping claim perfectly embodies the language of universal history that was central to the founding of the cooperative soil survey. While Whitney's ode to the soil map obscures the fact that the survey was a political tool, it captures surprisingly well the central role that these technologies of visualization play in the creation of "desired" landscapes. To achieve the most desirable national farmscape, Whitney insisted that all branches of government must draw on the soil survey. He argued, for instance, that the Division of Information in the Bureau of Immigration should use it for the “classification, segregation, and distribution” of immigrant laborers according to “the local soil and labor conditions” (1910, 337). Whitney's appeals to universal improvement embody a marriage of racial and environmental engineering while also masking the extent to which the soil survey was a crucial technology of control.

Readers should not be fooled, though, by these universal narratives and their allusions to concern with "civilization": the US soil survey was, first and foremost, a project of nation-

building. This section will illustrate that, among other things, it operated with the normative assumption that the ideal agricultural citizen was a white male land-owner (Knobloch 1996; Foley 1997). This assumption was embedded in US agricultural governance to the extent that "white" was unmarked, the self-referential standard by which all "others" were judged. What is important about the soil survey, then, is that it provided for this exclusive project a synoptic technology that had the power to create the landscape it purported only to describe.

Drawing on the publications of Whitney and other influential soil scientists of the era, this section outlines the intellectual traditions that provided the founding logic for the US cooperative soil survey. In doing so, it emphasizes not just the epistemologies of high-modernism that shaped the US agricultural landscape but also the ways that these articulated with ideologies of white supremacy. While Whitney was perhaps the most visible and prolific writer among his colleagues in soil science, he was not alone in his affinity for universalizing narratives. The prominent US soil scientists of this era, in fact, specialized in the genre. They often employed a "civilizationist" language that offered moralistic tales of improvement similar to the more common "man and nature" variety.[12] Whitney succinctly captures this narrative tradition in the title to his 1925 opus, *Soil and Civilization*. This sweeping tale, where an undifferentiated subject evolves from independent hunter-gatherer to calculating citizen of the modern capitalist state, has the convenient effect of naturalizing the need for a synoptic survey. It also, of course, obscures the violent colonial histories associated with the "settlement" of land and the expansion of the US administrative state. Finally, Whitney's narrative casts the soil scientist and the state in the role of benevolent advisor to the wayward masses.

[12] For a recent discussion of the on-going use of civilizationist language, see Engel-Di Mauro, 2014. *Ecology, Soils, and the Left: An Eco-Social Approach*. London: Palgrave MacMillan. Pp. 4, 11, 101-102.

Figure 5. Milton Whitney with national soil map (above) and portrait (below).

As the first chief of the Bureau of Soils and the survey administrator for over a decade, Milton Whitney exerted a long-lasting influence on their direction. He is most important here, however, for what his pronouncements reveal about the logic of the survey. In his aptly-titled 1901 piece, "The Purpose of a Soil Survey," Whitney portrays the soil survey as the "basis for *improved* and intensive cultivation," which was necessary for "the agricultural progress of the country" (117, emphasis added). This nationalistic project was clearly an unabashedly capitalist one. The soil survey was the chief instrument, according to Whitney, through which the state could "commercialize agriculture and make it a safe line of investment for capital." To accomplish this development, "the material – the soil – must be understood and its use determined" (1910, 337). Whitney continued to trumpet this agenda for the rest of his career, and argued that the Bureau of Soils was the department best positioned to facilitate this outcome.

Whitney's vision for US "agricultural development" rested on several normative spatial assumptions. Perhaps the most crucial to the project of white nationalism was the expansionist logic built into the survey. While the main audience for the survey might have been farmers, Whitney reminded readers that the survey was "also for the information of prospective purchasers and settlers" (124). This work had as its goal the planned cultivation and rational administration of a thoroughly "modern" national landscape. A 1924 article in *Agronomy Journal*, for instance, argued that the ever-growing knowledge of soils encapsulated in the survey was central to the wise settlement of "unused lands" (Rice 1924). The author insisted that, for state officials and farmers alike, "the soil survey report is the foundation upon which any valuation should be built" (417).

The Bureau of Soils conceptualized the survey not just as useful for the establishment of agricultural industries but also as central to "the extension of industries from one area to another"

(120). Whitney's plan of agricultural colonization depended on the synoptic vision of the soil survey, for it alone provided the technology to institute what he referred to as the "adaptation" of crop to soil: essentially, matching the "proper" crop to the "proper" soil. It was this principle of adaptation that undergirded the rational planning and cultivation of regional agricultural industries. Unsurprisingly, Whitney argued that "poor" agricultural regions are the result of ignorant farmers failing to properly adapt crop to soil. He tirelessly promoted this vision for decades. In a 1924 special issue of *Agronomy Journal,* for instance, he celebrated land enclosure for the ways that it "made possible individual competition and the adoption of the principle of the adaptation of soils to crops and all that has since developed in the perfection of methods through individual effort" (410). In the same article, Whitney argued in Malthusian tones that through its promotion of a rational and "improved" commercial agriculture, the soil survey remained central to the projects of nation-building. "As time goes on," he warned, "as our population increases, as the struggle for existence in this and in other countries may become more acute, the soil survey will be more and more appreciated and more and more essential to the organization and upbuilding of the highest possible development of agriculture" (411).

The soil-and-civilization genre was not restricted to official USDA publications. In 1913 Cyril G. Hopkins, an influential professor of soil science, penned a novel of universal history, titled *The Story of Soil: From the Basis of Absolute Science and Real Life*. Similar to Whitney's work it told a story of humanity's progress through various stages of backwardness until "absolute science" cultivated an agriculture worthy of the title "civilized". As fiction, however, *The Story of Soil* even more explicitly expresses the racial anxieties and masculine desires that characterized the soil science of the era. Hopkins's protagonist is a young man from the Midwest who obtains a university degree in agricultural science and decides to buy a large abandoned

farm in the benighted and backwards US South. On his journeys through the region gathering knowledge from elite farmers and soil samples to test, he develops a courtly relationship with a young woman and - one fateful morning - takes a carriage ride with her to the nearest town in order to test soil samples. On the way, the protagonist and his belle are ambushed by two "black brutes" who attempt to rape the woman, but he is able to save her and march the two men to jail. He discovers the next day that the offenders were lynched, and after a short discussion with the white enforcers, agrees that justice was served. In a manner reminiscent of Ruffin's fantasy of the slave south, this narrative seamlessly weaves together "real life" and "absolute science". Together, they dramatically illustrate the masculinist desires and white supremacist anxieties that undergirded the foundational work of US soil science.

The Soil Survey in Action

It is arguable that the cooperative soil survey has worked as a kind of "basemap" for US agricultural governance. In addition to its wide use in the assessment of land values for taxation, it has long been used for other purposes too. It was central, for instance, to early 20th century efforts to determine standard rates of fertilizer use (McCool 1924). After only two decades of use, scientists reported that it was used for, among other things, the design of civil engineering projects (roads and utilities), the valuation of property for farm loans, the design of "war maps," the targeted marketing of rural land by real estate agents, and the rational expansion of existing agricultural enterprises (Williams 1924).

In addition to these uses, the soil survey also served as the basemap for much of the land planning efforts of the early 20th century. Crystallizing in the New Deal national land utilization program, these projects dramatically re-shaped regional landscapes across the US (Nygren,

2014). New Deal experts, informed by the longstanding anxieties best-embodied in Turner's Frontier thesis, argued that to secure the nation's productive potential it was necessary to "rationalize" agricultural land uses. Only through such a program, argued prominent agricultural economist L.C. Gray, can haphazard and "wasteful" expansion "be supplanted by deliberate selection, careful economy, and constructive development with due reference to *the long-time requirements of the nation*" (quoted in Kirkendall 1966, emphasis added). These plans were often used to make crucial development decisions about which areas would receive public utilities such as electric service and improved roads, and in many cases they advocated the "planned abandonment" of "marginal" lands.

The classification of lands and administration of land uses is a thoroughly normative exercise. Knowledge of "the productive possibilities and limitations of various land classes," according to USDA director of extension M.L. Wilson, could prevent "low productivity, unemployment, poor schools, and a generally unsatisfactory way of life" (USDA, 1964, i). Without the knowledge encoded in surveys, experts claimed, families that purchased "poor land" were doomed to "the cycle of ownership, debt, losses, failure, and public relief" (ibid, 10). As Melanie DuPuis shows in her study of dairy production (2002), these planning projects favored "modern" capital-intensive valley farms over hard-scrabble hill farms, the later understood as "pathological" modes of land use. Subsistence production is, in fact, explicitly defined in one USDA report as an "unsuitable land use" (USDA 1964, 8). DuPuis argues that, in practice, "the policy solution was the eradication of other forms of farming - and living - through planning" (193).

The synoptic vision of the national soil survey was crucial to the classification schemes that underlay New Deal land planning. An USDA history of the land utilization program points

out that the first step taken in planning was to use the survey to grade soils into ten classes, ranging from "the best to the poorest" (1964, 7). To do so, they employed Whitney's standard of judging "the adaptability of the soil in its natural condition...to the kinds of crops grown in the region" (*ibid.*). In 1934 alone, land planners worked with "soils technicians, geographers, and economists" to classify land in "30,000 townships or minor civil divisions of the Nation" (8). The next section explores the ways that synoptic knowledge of soils shaped one of these regions - the South Carolina Lowcountry - and the implications of this history for broader understandings of US agricultural change.

Soil Surveys and the Reproduction of Plantation Geographies

Ever since European arrival in the South Carolina Lowcountry - the coastal area surrounding the port city of Charleston - the region has been defined by racial dynamics (Silver 1990; Carney 2001). From slavery to Jim Crow and into the current era, the region's large African American community has confronted structural racism (Dusinberre 1996, Wood 1996). More recently, Latino immigrants and migrant laborers have faced similar challenges. Throughout this long history of racism, control over access to and ownership of land has proven a central instrument of political struggle. In the aftermath of slavery, for instance, African-Americans were able to carve out spaces of relative autonomy in the rural Lowcountry and, through a hybrid strategy of subsistence provision, truck farming, and market gardening, built up some of the highest rates of black land ownership in the postbellum US South (Stewart 2002). Land ownership and the relative autonomy that came with it made the Lowcountry a hotspot of black political leadership into the Civil Rights era (Saunders 1980; Carawan 1994; Hahn 2005).

The first citizenship schools, for instance, which proved central to the Civil Rights movement, were founded in rural Charleston County (Charron 2012).

Yet in the early 20th century this landscape of relative black autonomy started to erode. In 1925, for instance, there were more than three thousand black farmers in Charleston County, but by 1940 there were less than half that many. Over this same time, however, the number of white farmers in the county remained fairly steady. Thus the most telling statistic is the ratio of black to white farmers in the region: in 1910 there were more than nine black farmers to every white farmer; by 1925 there were only five black farmers to every white farmer; and by 1945 the ratio was down to two-to-one. These trends continued throughout the second half of the century, to the point that by 1969 (and still today) there are more than ten white farmers to every black farmer (USDA census of agriculture).

There were several forces contributing to this dramatic decline in Lowcountry black farm operators. In addition to the constant threat of white violence over the first half of the 20th century, African Americans were also subject to the systematic discrimination of the USDA. Historians have recently highlighted the ways that overt and intentional discrimination by the USDA - refusing loans to qualified applicants, withholding expert knowledge, and arbitrarily reducing allotments - contributed to black farm loss (Daniel 2014). Yet they do not explain how black farmers were enrolled into the agricultural state to begin with; and it is also important to highlight the ways that programs of improvement - which generally claimed to assist all farmers - contributed to black farm dispossession. Soil surveys, as synoptic technologies that could make or break a farm, were crucial to both of these processes. At a time when the USDA had no permanent presence in the region, it was one of the initial programs that brought black farmers into the orbit of "improvement" and assigned state agricultural experts the role of intermediary,

thus sharply curtailing the relative autonomy from white society that black farmers had secured. It is not surprising, but important to emphasize nonetheless, that the expanding agricultural state brought black farmers into the fold not as equals but in a rigid hierarchy. Beginning in the 1920s the USDA established a lasting presence in the region and promoted commercial vegetable farming at the request of elite whites, a move which led to the marginalization of other ways of living and the instantiation of white ownership and black labor. As soil science was a powerful production technology, those with more land, capital and political clout (elite whites) benefitted disproportionately from the soil survey.

The politics of the Jim Crow era were also crucial to the unfolding of Lowcountry soil surveys. Agricultural science was vigorously promoted in the late 19th and early 20th century US as a conservative alternative to the more radical critiques of capitalist agriculture offered by populism and socialism (Rosenberg 1971). In a move familiar to scholars of today's environmental politics, science's claims to objectivity were used to depoliticize governance and authorize technical solutions. In the context of the Jim Crow South the agricultural crisis at the turn of the century was also a white racial crisis, and the soil survey offered the depoliticized and technical medium preferred by paternalistic improvers. The Civil War dealt a devastating blow to both plantation economies and white mythologies of cultural superiority, and Lowcountry leaders were desperate for a new regional vision. The soil survey promised to facilitate landscape "improvement" in several ways. A group of presentations at the Charleston Commercial Club in the spring of 1912 embodied this desire. In a series of speeches described as "thrilling" and "inspiring," regional boosters laid out a vision for renewal that hinged on the ability of experts to drain the marshes and "wastelands" surrounding the city in order to create more and higher quality arable land. Dr. J.A. Bonsteel, an USDA soil scientist, opened the event and "deeply

impressed" the crowd with his portrait of the opportunities presented by the recent soil survey. Invoking the "rousing" rhetoric of the Lost Cause, another speaker proclaimed that Charleston was "rich in the love of romance and legend and tradition," and still maintained "the fighting blood of old, the same courage, the same unconquerable soul." Literally speaking for the Lowcountry soil, he suggested branding Charleston as an agricultural paradise: "I have more and richer soil in a better climate…I have crops and no crop failures. I am raising two to four crops on this richest most productive land – producing more per acre than any other land that lies out of doors." [13] Alongside this effort to re-establish regional pride, Lowcountry planters also struggled to maintain their place atop the social hierarchy in the decades following emancipation and into the 20th century. Agricultural modernization was crucial to their efforts to establish a new order during this dynamic era and the soil survey was one of the earliest and most effective tools for ushering the region and its farmers into the folds of the improving agricultural state.

USDA soil surveys were easily articulated to regional projects of racialized dispossession, as the Lowcountry surveyors both drew on and contributed to their department's larger improvement project - that of planning an ordered and market-oriented landscape of white landholders. Beginning amidst the nation-wide agricultural recession of the 1920s and gaining momentum in New Deal efforts to combat the mushrooming Depression, scientists, planners, and zoners argued that the survey was an essential first step towards engineering an "improved" agriculture. The soil survey served as the basemap.[14]

The first USDA soil survey of the Charleston area was published in 1904 (figure 6 below). As the classifying schemes and surveying technologies of soil science changed over the

[13] *Charleston News and Courier*, "Clendenin Thrills Hearers," April 17, 1912, pg. 9.

[14] Among many others, see United States Department of Agriculture, 1964. "The Land Utilization Program, 1934-1964," Agricultural Economic Report no. 85: Washington, DC. Pg 7.

course of the century the USDA updated the maps.[15] Charleston County was re-surveyed in the 1950s and ‘60s, and the final report was published in 1971. Both the 1904 and 1971 Charleston area surveys consist of extensive maps accompanied by narrative analysis. The text for the 1904 survey is 23 pages, while the 1971 document stretches to more than 80 pages of text. This essay focuses mostly on the 1904 survey because it articulates the foundational logics of the survey and also served as the basemap for much of the 20th century regional planning.

The language of the surveys is important, not for what it tells us about the individual biases of the authors, but for what it tells us about broader normative understandings of race and landscape that were constitutive of US soil science and agricultural governance. The 1904 survey is founded on an overt racial prejudice against African-Americans, who are understood as inherently inferior and capable of only menial labor. This racial hierarchy was so common sense to white agricultural experts that it was generally implicit, but the norms of the profession at the time also allowed for frequent explicit expressions. In a cool and detached tone, for instance, the soil scientists note that "the labor problem resulting from the civil war has been worked out to a satisfactory solution. The laboring class is composed entirely of negroes" (1904, 209). It is clear that the surveyors see themselves as beholden to not only large farmers but also to white supremacy, for only then could they assume that this system of racialized labor was a "satisfactory solution".

African Americans are also naturalized as part of the "exotic" and "dangerous" wild landscapes of the coast. The soil scientists describe the region's rural places, for instance, in language that seems as if it were pulled from the diary of a contemporary Dutch trader in the

[15] The early soil surveys were based on a classification scheme concerned mostly with soil texture, while the later soil surveys focused on the parent material of the soil.

Figure 6. 1904 soil survey map of Charleston area.

Congo: "...the water front and John's Island are *uncleared* except for occasional small areas along the shore. The interior, with its *dense* pine forests and *mazes* of cypress swamps, is almost *impenetrable*. Few white people live on this island, and the large colored population derives an existence from agricultural pursuits and the natural food supply of forest and stream" (226, emphasis added). In addition to associating African-Americans with a dangerous and wild nature, it is clear that the scientists were also blind to the extent of settled agriculture on the island.[16] Drawing on colonial notions of race and nature, they saw a largely-black landscape as an exotic, dangerous, and unproductive one - in short, as *unimproved*.

The surveyors' fawning description of Lowcountry planters, on the other hand, reveals their attachment to the myth of white agricultural prowess:

> Agriculture in the Charleston area is carried on principally by white planters of *a high degree of intelligence, culture, and refinement*. They are almost without exception in comfortable or affluent circumstances, favored with an equable climate and easily tilled responsive lands, enjoying an ideal country life, with time and opportunity for research and experimental work in agricultural lines, of which opportunity many of the foremost have availed themselves, *with much profit to the community*. (226)

Beyond the obvious white supremacist fantasy evident in the surveyors' description, it is also important to note that the existence of poor rural whites is ignored. The surveyors' field of vision was skewed in a way that racialized poor rural whites as "not quite white" (Wray 2006), thereby cementing "white" as metonym for wealthy.

As the agricultural crisis of the 1920s deepened, agricultural bureaucrats redoubled their improvement efforts. Planning was a central component of this project, and planners again considered surveying the landscape the necessary first step. In the late 1920s and early '30s

[16] The USDA Census of Agriculture as well as numerous other sources clearly indicate that agriculture was widely-practiced on John's Island at this time.

armies of social scientists spread out across the US taking inventory and rushing their findings back to the centers of calculation. In addition to their soil testing equipment and ledger pads, though, they also toted with them a heavy normative baggage that shaped their perception of the problems and methods of improvement. One such group of agricultural economists published "An Agricultural Survey of the Charleston Area" in 1928.[17] Their work was part of early New Deal efforts at "Land Utilization Planning" which, as Melanie DuPuis points out, understood subsistence-oriented and impoverished agricultural landscapes as "submarginal," "maladjusted," and "pathological" modes of land use (191). The planners' prescriptions, as one might expect, were for a more "rational" and "improved" system of agriculture - essentially a more market-oriented, intensive, and industrialized model.

As already argued, however, the New Dealers' normative visions of productive agriculture were not narrowly "economic" ones but also thoroughly racialized. Productive, profitable, and therefore "proper" agriculture was understood by agricultural experts, at least in the South Carolina Lowcountry, as a white enterprise. This is evident, for instance, in the way that the 1928 agricultural survey of the Charleston area denies the possibility of "successful" black farmers. The stated objective of the survey is to determine "what the planters of the Charleston area should produce" and to describe the "typical farms having the best practices" (5). The use of the language of "planter" - a word reserved for elite white male landowners - immediately signals the intended audience. After a discussion of the soils and topography of the region, the survey moves on to the "economic analysis" of agricultural production. The surveyors note that Charleston County has over three thousand black farmers compared to only six hundred

[17] Clemson College, Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 253. "An Agricultural Survey of the Charleston Area," December 1928.

white farmers, yet they included only large white-owned farms for consideration as potential "model" operations. The economists then took from this sample 50 farms and divided them into three groups: those that made annual profits exceeding $3,000 (16 farms), those that made annual profits of less than $1,000 (20); and those that fell in between (14). The assumption embedded in this classification scheme is, of course, that "model" farm operations should not only be market-oriented and profit-maximizing, but (due to the *prima facie* exclusion of black farmers) also white.

The surveyors' conclusions flow directly from this logic. "The better planters organize their plantations differently," the surveyors insist, than the "less successful farmers" (52). Without a hint of awareness to the obvious bias of their approach, the surveyors note that "better planters," first of all, "operate plantations with more acres in crops" (*ibid*). The eight remaining characteristics of "model" farms that the agricultural economists outline are simply averages drawn from the class of profitable (read "elite white") operations: "they keep about 12 or 13 animals"; "they planted about 80 acres of corn"; "they produced 187 crates of cabbage"; and other similar descriptions of "farm organization" (52-53). The circular logic of the 1928 Charleston survey explicitly indicates that the agricultural state understood "successful" production as large scale and profit-maximizing. Yet what is implicit, the everyday "common sense," is just as important: by taking whiteness as the unmarked category - the standard - economists and planners defined proper agriculture as a white enterprise. Those who did not fit within these narrow dimensions were deemed subjects of improvement, hailed as insufficiently "white". Thus, while black farmers were categorically denied from being considered "successful," they were whole-heartedly targeted by state programs. This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion is a central problematic of liberal improvement projects.

Successive waves of secondary surveys - which followed the initial 1904 survey - washed across the Lowcountry throughout the 1920s and '30s, an era of general expansion in the region by the agricultural state. The Clemson University Truck Crop Experiment Station and the USDA Vegetable Research Lab, for instance, were founded outside of Charleston in the mid-1930s with the support of an elite planter society and still operate today. The 1904 survey was one of the first systematic efforts through which the USDA engaged Lowcountry farmers, and it was key to paving the way for the agricultural state in the region. While the 1904 survey positioned itself as expert knowledge, it also balanced this with a method that was aimed at sharing the "best practices" of area farmers. Like Edmund Ruffin nearly a century before them, the surveyors interviewed white planters extensively about their practices (Matthew 2012). It was performed by experts sent in from afar, and suggests that they had little contact with or interest in black farmers. The surveys conducted in the 1920s and '30s however were performed by local or regional experts who, citing the need to improve general health and productivity, covered a wider swath of the farmscape. By this point the recognized power of the surveys had helped establish the USDA as the regional agricultural authority, a necessary mediator between farmers and the soil. "Everyone was as courteous and willing to cooperate as could be," the Charleston County surveyor, whose family name now graces an exclusive island resort, commented in a 1935 letter. Everyone was eager to get the state's soil assistance, he exclaimed, "from government officials down to the lowest darky." The surveyor from neighboring Dorchester County reported that same year that, "We contacted 1,816 households and everyone was always anxious to cooperate...No project has ever been such a complete success." W.B. Browning, "owner of one of the largest and best farms," reportedly thought it "a very worthy project." Likewise, the

surveyor reports that Jim, "aged negro," explained, "I have been on this land since slavery time and I sho' do want my land tested."[18]

These contemporary accounts of the survey are telling for several reasons. First, black farmers were increasingly included - even targeted - largely based on the claim that general improvement and increased production was necessary. Yet, this process of inclusion resulted in their placement at the bottom of a rigid hierarchy - "from government officials down to the lowest darky" - which simultaneously excluded black farmers (from the possibility of being considered a "successful" farmer, for instance, and definitely from the possibility of participating in USDA governance). As the agricultural state was firmly rooted in assumptions about white supremacy, this inclusion was one which further eroded the limited autonomy that Lowcountry black farmers had successfully established.

Finally, it's important to recognize that the survey also worked explicitly and disproportionately to the benefit of elites. As powerful synoptic technologies that were thoroughly informed by an attachment to white nationalism, the soil surveys contributed to the reproduction of plantation geographies in the Lowcountry. Much of the specifics are excluded from the historical record, of course, but the story of Milbank Plantation illuminates part of this process. In 1939, in the depths of the Great Depression, a New York investment banker named Jeremiah Milbanks bought a huge 23,000 acre swath of Lowcountry land. This vast stretch of sandy hilltops and swampy lowlands had no doubt previously been important to the subsistence economy of the region's rural poor. As Mart Stewart (2002) and others have demonstrated, these southern "wildernesses" were actually inhabited and productive landscapes that were central to

[18] These quotes are drawn from letters located in the Clemson University Extension Archives: Series 32, box 104, folder 9.

African-Americans from the era of enslavement well into the 20th century (see also Kirby 2008). Despite the fact that the property was described as "hopeless" and "worthless" Milbanks bought the property "sight unseen" for an undisclosed amount of money. He was confident in what the *Charleston News and Courier*, in a 1946 article celebrating the project, referred to as the "soil magic" of agricultural experts.[i] A year earlier, Milbanks had called on agricultural scientists who "made surveys, gave advice..., and offered a farm plan". With equipment from the soil conservation service, workers dug ditches and laid out a large truck farming operation, established a 1,000-head Angus cattle ranch, and started a flock of 30,000 turkeys (complete with "assembly-line" slaughter facilities). Five generations later, the tract remains in the Milbanks family and is now an exclusive hunting resort: Turkey Hill Plantation. The website describes their mission as "preserving the atmosphere of old-fashioned gracious Southern hospitality that has been integral to this beautiful private property for generations." As the story of Turkey Hill indicates, the geography of the plantation is alive and well in the South Carolina Lowcountry, due in no small part to the "soil magic" of the US agricultural state.[19]

Conclusion

The history of the US cooperative soil survey, in the Lowcountry and beyond, is a history of improvement. To paraphrase Freida Knobloch (1994: 16), the survey was the means by which soil became valuable and was released from its past into the history of improvement. As such, it involved not only synoptic ways of knowing and bureaucratic forms of organization, but also rigid norms of whiteness. Despite their differences, both Edmund Ruffin's 19th century efforts to

[19] *Charleston News and Courier*, "'Hopeless' Land Reclaimed by Milbanks near Ridgeland," September 29, 1946.

slow the decline of southern plantation society and those of the agricultural state to administer the national farmscape in the 20th century were both projects of agricultural and racial improvement that rested on normative assumptions linking whiteness and agricultural prowess. Tragically, they were also both largely successful in reproducing plantation geographies.

Recent scholarship along with landmark legal cases have illuminated the many ways in which US agricultural governance has perpetuated racialized dispossession, specifically African-American land loss (*Pigford v. Glickman* 1999; Gilbert 2002). Though geographers and political ecologists have yet to consistently engage with what many call the "black farm crisis," the outlines are clear: at its peak in 1910 African American landownership in the US reached 15 million acres, but steadily declined over the course of the century until it rested at just 2.3 million acres in 1997 (Thomas, Pennick, and Gray 2004). This rate of decline far exceeds that of any other racial or ethnic group, while *white landownership grew steadily* over this period (Gilbert and Sharp 2002). Overt acts of discrimination are central to the racialized dispossession of agricultural land and livelihoods in the 20th century US. Pete Daniel's recent book *Dispossession* (2012), for instance, emphasizes the role of racist USDA county agents in agricultural discrimination. The history of the US cooperative soil survey, however, shows that the epistemic foundations of science in the modern liberal state can re-create uneven landscapes regardless of malicious individual intent: powerful synoptic technologies informed by liberal notions of improvement are easily-articulated to overt forms of oppression.

The UN declaration of 2015 as the International Year of Soils is emblematic of growing global attention to the study and management of this crucial resource. Political ecologists have much to contribute to these conversations, reminding scientists and policy-makers of the ways that expert knowledge is often informed by colonial legacies. As I have tried to show here, for

instance, a rejuvenated political ecology of soil can contribute to the pressing need for scholarship on racialized dispossession by examining the ways that expert knowledge about soil articulates with national and racial ideologies in the practice of agricultural governance. This is a topic that is global in scope. Alongside this empirical-analytical project, there is also a need to conceptualize radical notions of improvement. Pursuing such projects, a rejuvenated political ecology of soil might not only sharpen the hatchet of critique but also help plant the seed of a more just and sustainable future.[20]

CHAPTER 3

"A STRUGGLE OF UNPARALLELED INTENSITY":

REPRODUCING PLANTATION GEOGRAPHIES IN THE POSTBELLUM LOWCOUNTRY

In his important study of the rural Lowcountry in slavery's wake, social historian John Scott Strickland characterized the search for a new order in the region as "a struggle of unparalleled intensity." While the exceptional nature of the claim is debatable, he clearly and convincingly outlines the competing interests and visions of Lowcountry African Americans, white planters, and Freedman's Bureau officials. Strickland argues that the "traditional culture and moral economy" which Lowcountry slaves developed over a century and a half of bondage was crucial to their efforts to cultivate a better future. "In coastal South Carolina," he concludes, "the African-American drive for freedom with social and cultural integrity was *just as influential* as the visions, expectations, and power of Northern and Southern whites in directing the vectors of change."[21]

His argument has proven persuasive to many and contributes to a view of the postbellum Lowcountry as a place where freedpeople approached yeoman status, and thus came closer than their counterparts across the South to the promises of equality suggested by Reconstruction. Similarly, Mart Stewart argues that "African Americans were on the whole able to remain more independent of white supervision and domination - to be more 'free' - than freedmen and women

[21] John Scott Strickland, "Traditional Culture and Moral Economy: Social and Economic Change in the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1865-1910," in *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 141–42, emphasis added.

in other plantation areas of the South." Like most historical scholarship on the Lowcountry, however, Strickland barely treats the 20th century (essentially ending with the census of 1910). Stewart dramatically (and literally) ends his narrative at this moment of black autonomy also: "On the eve of the 20th century...the landscape of the African Americans whom the planters had dominated became the dominant one on the Georgia coast." Together with a somewhat-celebratory treatment of resistance this periodization obscures the fact that, despite the significant space Lowcountry freedpeople carved out for themselves in the decades following Emancipation, their vision of acquiring independent yeoman status was quickly and decisively dashed.[22]

The turn of the 20th century was actually the high point of black land ownership in the Lowcountry, as it was across the US South more generally.[23] In 1900, for instance, there were more than 9 black farmers to every 1 white farmer in Charleston County. By 1925 the ratio was less than 5 to 1, and by 1950 less than 2 to 1. The trend lines march steadily across the century. Today there are more than 10 white farmers to every 1 black farmer. Land tenure patterns are similarly racialized: by 1997 more than 97 percent of land in Charleston County was in white hands, much of it concentrated in large holdings. Obviously, the rise of small farming and a black yeomanry in the late 19th century did not, as Strickland and his followers argue, "set plantation agriculture on the road to irreversible decline." This chapter examines the late 19th and early 20th century struggles over the future of the Lowcountry's agricultural landscape in order to better understand the beginnings of this continuing dispossession.[24]

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[22] Mart Stewart, *"What Nature Suffers to Groe": Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002); for the quotes see pg. 239 and 242. Another important historical work which offers the same periodization is, Peter A. Coclanis, *The Shadow of a Dream* .

[23] Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination against African-American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights*

[24] All Charleston County farm statistics drawn from USDA Census of Agriculture. Quote from Strickland, 163.

This analysis has relevance beyond the Lowcountry as it situates the region's history in the context of the growing agricultural state and broader efforts to reproduce plantation hegemony in moments of crisis. It draws from recent work on plantation geographies (McKittrick 2013; Woods 1998) and the growth of the US development state (Domosh 2015; Nalley and Taylor 2015) to elaborate a framework for studying racialized dispossession in the plantation belt of the Americas (see also Serrano, 2015).[25] While the particular geography of the plantation is always shifting, there is also a stubborn and lasting stability. Challenging the legacies of the plantation requires focusing on this stability, thus the method employed here emphasizes *continuity within change*. I conceptualize plantation geographies as the reproduction of racial hierarchy through the white monopolization of land and attendant claims to agrarian citizenship. In liberal states, the resulting social formation is structured by a paternalistic moral economy and shaped by improvement projects that firmly articulate whiteness and agricultural governance.

The US Department of Agriculture and Plantation Geographies

Geographers have long questioned the purported death of the US plantation, but much of this work is characterized by a relatively narrow and empiricist form of spatial analysis that fails to capture the ubiquitous, multiple and haunting nature of the plantation's geography (Aiken 2003; Prunty 1955). Scholars inspired by the work of radical Afro-Caribbean critics (Beckford 2000; Wynter 1971), however, have recently breathed new life into the question of plantation geographies, suggesting that the matter is in many ways central to both a history of the present

[25] By "plantation belt of the Americas" I refer to that historical-geographical region in the Americas where plantation agriculture formed the backbone of colonial society - stretching from northern Brazil through the Caribbean and into the US South. See, for instance, Aiken 2003, Greeson 2010, and Wallerstein 1988.

and an abolitionist future - in the US South and beyond (Woods 1998; McKittrick 2013). Together this work prompts several urgent and compelling questions: How should critics conceptualize the plantation? What changes and continuities characterize the history of the plantation? And, finally, what are the ongoing effects of plantation geographies and how might they be challenged?

This essay offers one framework for approaching these questions – there are, of course, many other promising directions as well (see Shepherd and McWilliam 2013). As Clyde Woods shows in his study of race and agriculture in the Mississippi Delta (1998), the question of US plantation geographies in the long 20th century must take into account the fact that the USDA often fills the role of development agency in rural regions. And, following the resolution of landmark legal action that found the USDA liable for discrimination against black farmers (*Pigford v. Glickman* 1999), historians and rural sociologists have illuminated even more ways that the powerful state bureaucracy perpetuated racial inequality in the US South (Daniel 2013; Reed and Bennett 2014). While much of this research has focused on male farmers and domestic fields, the tentacles of the agricultural state clearly reach much farther still. Mona Domosh (2015), for instance, deftly indicates the effective grasp of the USDA by emphasizing not only the gendered and racialized norms that drove early 20th century home demonstration experts inside rural households across the US South, but also the extent to which these projects informed US development work abroad during the Cold War.[26] Thus, her article in many ways extends Woods's conceptualization of the USDA as an apparatus of development.

Yet at the beginning of the 20th century the USDA was a young and ill-defined government agency struggling for both federal funding and local legitimacy (Rosenberg 1971). It

[26] For more on this burgeoning theme see Nalley and Taylor (2015), as well as Ekbladh (2011).

was by no means predetermined that the USDA would become the bureaucratic behemoth that it is today. Nor did the USDA represent the first powerful institution of agricultural development in the Americas. In fact, this article shows that the development practices of the 20th century agricultural state were pre-figured by the 18th and 19th century work of imperial gentleman science. Thus it examines the process by which the USDA secured a lasting role as the regional development institution in the South Carolina Lowcountry. This *longue duree* account of agricultural science in the Lowcountry indicates some of the defining features of plantation geographies and explains the role of the USDA in their reproduction. In doing so it emphasizes the centrality of "improvement" projects, whether state-led or otherwise, for the reproduction of the plantation and suggests that any effort to challenge this historical trajectory depends on challenging liberal modes of improvement.

Drawing from work in postcolonial and development studies, I emphasize the normative dimensions of notions of "modern" agriculture promoted by reformers and scientists alike (Gupta 1998; Scott 1999). Projects of improvement are characterized by a "trustee" relationship in which expert knowledge is privileged and oftentimes reshapes the landscape in its own image (Mitchell 2002; Li 2007). These projects can be overtly elitist or work through more emancipatory aims, oftentimes sidling between both modes in an effort to negotiate the twin imperatives of social legitimation and capital accumulation. While this recognition has been central to critiques of the development state, the dual functions of legitimacy and accumulation are too often abstracted from their fundamental articulation with racial politics (Hall 1980; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Moore 2005; Kosek 2006). Thus, this essay analyzes agricultural improvement as a project of racial improvement and focuses on their role in moments of crisis. Lowcountry plantation geographies faced perhaps their greatest challenge to date in the early 20th century. The projects

of improvement administered by planters and their USDA allies that eventually resolved this crisis targeted the farmscape through the bodies of farmers. This logic of governance was therefore never solely about some mythical abstract "agriculture," but also about whiteness: improvement projects worked to create laborers and farmers (of whatever racial identity) that behaved according to the dictates of a shifting white capitalist order (DuBois 1998 [1935]; Hall 1986; Robinson 2000).

Racial and Agricultural Improvement in the Lowcountry

Although the Lowcountry was one of the earliest and wealthiest plantation regions in the colonial Americas, its prominence in the world system was already slipping prior to the Civil War. In the wake of Emancipation, the region quickly fell into a peripheral position. Many plantation owners had abandoned their lands during the long Union occupation of the Sea Islands south of Charleston. Those that continued to hold their property often did so *in absentia*. The global market for cotton and rice dropped sharply as other regions in the US and beyond entered the competition. Most obviously, the end of slavery disrupted the labor system central to plantation production. In response, Northern and Southern whites negotiated a system of contracts that prevented the reinstitution of formal slavery but that continued to serve the interests of Southern capital and white supremacy. Those with the most influence in these debates – Southern elites and Northern Reconstruction officials – positioned themselves as trustees of the freedpeople. If too much was given the former slaves, one Reconstruction official observed, “the relation between capital and labor would be disturbed, and an undue value placed upon the latter, *to the prejudice and disadvantage, in the end, of the laborers themselves*”

(Strickland, 144). This logic of racial improvement *via* labor management was central to white efforts to reproduce the Lowcountry plantation in the aftermath of the Civil War.[27]

The reinstitution of plantation geographies, however, was not a speedy or simple project. It was not until the 1920s, in fact, that the Lowcountry plantation bloc re-established black economic dependence, and through that, an unfettered white supremacy. In the intervening decades the struggle over the new order was remarkably open-ended, creating hope among freedpeople and intense anxiety among whites. Lowcountry African Americans worked to establish a landscape of relative autonomy built around hybrid market/subsistence livelihoods. They successfully negotiated for task rather than wage pay, and resisted working in the hated rice fields at all costs. Elite whites desperately grasped for a solution to "the labor problem" that would buttress their position atop the social pyramid. The science of agricultural improvement proved central to their eventual ability to do so.

While some planters marched on after Emancipation with the determination to lead the cotton and rice kingdom into a new century, others thought this mission a lost cause. Rice production died out more quickly than cotton, due largely to black resistance to “mud work”, increasing competition from new rice farms in the Southwest, and the failed attempts to mechanize rice production in the Lowcountry. It was seemingly easier for cotton planters to adapt, although most of them had to switch from the treasured Sea Island fiber to the short-staple variety. Still other planters switched to truck farming - growing fresh vegetables for distant urban markets in the US North.

[27] For the decline of the region’s economy prior to the Civil War, see Peter A. Coclanis, *The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death in the South Carolina Low Country*, 1670-1920 ; Strickland, “Traditional Culture and Moral Economy,” provides the best account of the struggles over labor in the immediate aftermath of the war. The quote is drawn from Strickland, 144.

Continuing a practice rooted in "them dark days" of slavery (Dusinberre 1996), freedpeople who acquired access to land often grew produce for the Charleston city market as well as for home consumption. In fact, most of the city's fresh fruits and vegetables were provided by African American market gardeners working just a few acres outside of the city. They also hunted, fished and gathered a wide variety of provisions for their home table or market stall. Many complemented this non-waged labor with part-time work in the fields of their former owners, at the docks, or in the saw mills that were sprouting up across the region.[28]

The Growth of Truck Farming

Southern soils had actually supplied some fresh produce for large Northern cities before the Civil War, but the trade was negligible. In the late 19th century, several factors came together that facilitated the growth of truck farming across the coastal US South. Chief among these was the expansion of steamer and rail connections to mushrooming urban markets like New York City. Combined with the longer growing season along the southern coast this made it possible for the region's produce to reach the market while Northern fields remained frozen. The development of new fertilizers at least temporarily revived the abused fields of the South. Not least of all, the availability of cheap and skilled agricultural labor, almost exclusively freed slaves, provided the necessary muscle.[29]

The South Carolina Lowcountry was arguably the most important truck farming region in the US from the 1870s until California surpassed it in the 20th century (see figure 7 below). The Charleston Neck, a narrow strip of land embraced by the Ashley and Cooper Rivers and situated just outside of Charleston, was the first center of truck production in the Lowcountry. Farms in

[28] Dusinberre 1996; Shields 2015; Stewart 2002.
[29] Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe*, 225.

Figure 7. Advertisement for the N.H Blitch company in Charleston County, South Carolina – the self-proclaimed "Largest Truck Farm in the World".

Mount Pleasant, just a few miles away across the Cooper River, grew large amount of asparagus and artichoke. Truck farming enterprises vined to the islands south of Charleston in the 1880s: James, Johns, Wadmalaw, and Edisto. Beginning with February asparagus and cabbage, the Lowcountry shipped produce northward into the late fall. As gardeners and growers in the region know today, however, there is a significant lull in July and August due to the extremes of summer. And as much of the profit from truck farming depended on getting the produce to market at times when competitors to the north could not, Lowcountry growers focused their energies on both early and late summer crops. Thus there were really two peak seasons every year: April/May and October. By the 1880s truck could be shipped to Philadelphia, New York, and Washington in less than forty-eight hours.[30]

Agricultural labor has been an especially marginalized and precarious sector throughout US history, but the advent of the truck farming industry created a uniquely strained set of labor relations. Cindy Hahamovitch (1997) shows that it was actually the growth of truck farming that created the Atlantic Coast stream of impoverished migrant farmworkers. Because it was difficult to mechanize harvest of fresh fruits and veggies, "truck farmers' labor needs, more than any other farmers', were concentrated around the harvest. They were thus dependent on laborers who arrived just when they were needed and left when they were not." Labor was also the only expense over which growers had much control, thus the availability of skilled workers was a constant obsession for truck growers. Compared to their counterparts on the US West coast, Eastern truck farms were significantly smaller in size. Whereas California truck farms relied on a large migrant labor force from the beginning, Hahamovitch argues that the smaller scale of operation forced truck growers on the Atlantic Coast to tap into functioning labor markets on a

[30] Shields, *Southern Provisions*, 216.

seasonal basis. It is questionable whether scale of individual operation (as opposed to total regional farm acreage, or any number of other historical-geographical differences) is the main cause of differential labor dynamics, but the point remains: truck farming labor relations developed a regional character in the Lowcountry and along the Atlantic Coast more broadly. This pattern blurred the line between agricultural and industrial labor, tended to equalize wages and conditions North and South, and exacerbated the constant anxiety among growers about harvest labor. Thus, in the late 19th century Lowcountry, seasonal agricultural labor fit in well with both freedpeople's desire for flexible and short-term cash wages and truck farmers need for temporary skilled hands.[31]

Labor management was so central to the growing truck industry that it was the subject of the first chapter of the most important manual for southern growers in the post-bellum years. Dr. Armenius Oemler, the president of the Chatham County (Savannah), GA Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, published his guide for "the raising of vegetables for Northern markets" in 1883. Oemler claimed to have started truck farming in the Savannah area in 1857 and stated among his credentials that he was "probably the largest slave-owner, engaged in vegetable culture, in this area." His opening chapter, simply titled "Labor," argues that "the death of slavery was the birth of truck-farming on an extensive scale" in the region. It was simply not possible, according to Oemler, to "control" year round as many slaves as are needed during the harvest season, "and few, or none, could have been hired." Thus, with so many freedpeople available for "the pressing season of gathering his crops," truck farming provided many planters with a convenient source of short-term labor. The same qualities of truck farming also allowed growers to relinquish responsibilities to their hands after harvest season was over.[32]

[31] Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor*, 5-6.
[32] Oemler, 1884. *Truck-Farming at the South: A Guide to the Raising of Vegetables for Northern Markets,"* 8.

Yet, the hands that Oemler and other growers envisaged were no "abstract labor". "The negro must be accepted as the only practical solution of the labor question," he reasoned, "and, notwithstanding his instability, he is the best for many reasons." It would be "impolitic" to allow the races to mix in the fields, and - as for European immigrant labor - Oemler argued that they would not be dependable due to the fact that their "praiseworthy desire for self-elevation would soon prompt the emigrant, or white laborer, to change his status and better his condition." Once truck farmers accepted freedpeople as "the God-given instrument for the development of the agricultural resources of the South...profiting by his general wastefulness and improvidence for his own good and our own, it should be the constant aim of every employer, who has the welfare of southern agriculture at heart, to elevate the laborer." Oemler encouraged his fellow growers to employ "strict justice, fairness and even kindness," so as to "render him satisfied with his lot." Doing so would ensure that the recently freed slaves, "instead of being an irritating element of the body politic...may become a contented and useful member thereof." The task of the responsible grower, for Oemler, is to cultivate a docile worker who follows the norms of white liberal capitalism: in short, to employ labor management as racial improvement.[33]

The project of creating "whitened" workers, of turning Lowcountry freedpeople into willing capitalist subjects, is one that profited from the humane values of "justice, fairness and even kindness," rather than the crack of the slave-drivers whip. This disciplinary approach meshed well with paternalistic claims to improvement, validating the grower's role as trustee. When employers saw freedpeople as party to a universal human nature that was rational and volitional, rather than outside of this imagined humanity, they were actually better able to control them. Oemler relied, for instance, on the belief that all humanity was bound together by the

[33] *ibid,* 7-8.

universal trait of emulation into an inherently improving world when he argued that "exceptional instances of self-elevation and independence should be correctly appreciated and encouraged as a spur to others." Thus, in the hands of Oemler and other trustees, the humane values of liberal capitalism were an essential guidebook for the project of whitening freedpeople, of creating willing wage-earners who would govern themselves.[34]

According to an 1884 report, labor was hired on Charleston Neck vegetable farms on a job basis at a daily rate of pay: seventy-five cents for a black male and fifty cents for a black woman. The same report claims that four out of five workers were black, and the remainder were white. Of the one hundred fifty-seven truck farms on the Neck, only twelve used white labor. No freedpeople owned farmland there until 1883, but black tenant farmers operated nineteen farms with all black workforces. On James Island, a less desirable place to work farther outside of town, workers received monthly wage with rations.

Though most Lowcountry African Americans engaged in truck farming were limited to labor or tenant status, some were able to secure ownership of these growing enterprises themselves. On an 1887 field trip to scout the Southern competition, established New Jersey grower Peter Henderson reported with surprise that one of the best farms he observed was run by "two modest-looking colored men of middle age, who, from a beginning with 11 acres in 1864, had, by 1883 got to be owners of 75 acres of valuable land, right in the suburbs of Charleston, every acre of which was worked in vegetable and fruit crops in the most thorough manner." He reports being impressed with their operation before meeting them but never dreamed "from their intelligent manner of doing business but what they were white men." Henderson's comments give voice to widespread doubts by white observers both North and South about the ability of

[34] *ibid.*

black farmers to "intelligently" manage a farm. Despite the occasional "success story," almost all large Lowcountry truck farms were white owned.[35]

At the start of the 20th century, Lowcountry truck farming appeared to many to promise steady growth in the region and profit to the grower. Though many other crops were grown, cabbage and potatoes dominated the rural landscape. Indeed, according to an outside observer in 1908, the whole region had gone "cabbage crazy," as during his visit "hundreds of acres, which had formerly been devoted to the growing of Cotton, became vast Cabbage fields." In 1914, there were 5,000 acres in cabbage and more than 6,000 acres of potatoes in Charleston County alone. That same year the South Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture lamented that Lowcountry truck farms were "not as wholly developed as they ought to be," but predicted that they "very likely will be in the near future." Charleston truck farmers reaped over two and a half million dollars in profit that year, and the potential seemed limitless to many. One booster, intoxicated by these gaudy numbers, argued that "in these trucking soils the South possesses a 'gold mine' worth far more than all the actual gold mines of the world, because it may be maintained as an exhaustless source of wealth."[36]

The Death of Sea Island Cotton and Rice

Though many Lowcountry growers reaped the financial fruits of the newly-established truck farming industry, the hardline planters could not bring themselves to give up on the cotton and rice plantations that had previously secured their financial fortunes and continued to provide the exalted symbolic status as master of plantation geographies. A nostalgic account of the

[35] Henderson, 361.
[36] *Eleventh Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture, Commerce, and Industries of the State of South Carolina*, 1914, 52-56.

planter attachment to rice and cotton published by the Agricultural Society of South Carolina mourns that "the farmer who must abandon the cultivation of a time-honored crop feels that he has lost a friend." Similarly, many planters described it as "an awful wrench" when they were forced to switch from the exceptional and exclusive Sea Island cotton to the "coarse, ordinary" short-staple variety: "they felt they were coming down in the world." In fact, the last planter to grow Sea Island cotton in the Charleston area, the "pugnacious" Swinton Whaley, actually only planted a few rows bordering the highway in order to keep up the appearance. Reflecting several decades later on the decline of Sea island cotton and rice in the 1910's and '20s, the Agricultural Society concluded that it "came almost like death in the family" and "broke the spirit" of many planters. Clearly, this "wrenching" period required the planter's to not only find new crops and new methods to reproduce the plantation, but also to cultivate new identities. The former was perhaps easier than the latter. [37]

In many ways World War I marked the transition from a farm economy dependent on rice and cotton to one driven by commercial vegetable farming. The refusal, if at all possible, of freedpeople to labor in the rice fields, the continued success of truck farmers (supported by outrageous boosterism), and "encouragement" by Northern creditors to give up on cotton were all critical to this shift. So too, of course, was the arrival of the cotton boll weevil in the region and the crash of the global cotton market in 1919. While the direction of this trend seems obvious in retrospect, it was not so clearly inevitable to many in the mix - especially the planter class and the Agricultural Society of South Carolina. In the face of all of the challenges mentioned above, the plantation bloc continued to leverage agricultural improvement towards the reproduction of the rice and cotton landscape into the 1920s and '30s. Indeed, as the boll weevil

[37] Murray, *This Our Land*, 195-196.

approached the Lowcountry from the west they only redoubled their efforts. Planter anxiety peaked in these crisis years and they responded by recruited the growing agricultural state to the region. Over the course of the 1920s and '30s the Agricultural Society facilitated the permanent presence of the USDA and Clemson cooperative extension in the Lowcountry and, in doing so, largely outsourced their work of agricultural improvement to the state.

Lowcountry rice planters were never able to solve "the labor problem" after Emancipation and increasing competition from growers in the Southwest flooded the market in the following decades. On top of these challenges, four out of five Lowcountry rice plants were destroyed by blight in 1903. The Agricultural Society encouraged its members to develop a blight-resistant variety through breeding experiments but none were successful. Two years later blight swept the Charleston rice plantations again and prices continued to tumble. Despite the occasional slight uptick in price the trend was continuously downward, and planters continued to withdraw acreage. It is impossible and unadvisable to disentangle the multiple causes of this decline, though, for as the Agricultural Society reported in 1906: "Fortunately high prices (for rice) prevail, but the acreage is the smallest in years. If sufficient labor was available it could be increased."[38]

In 1902 the Agricultural Society unsuccessfully petitioned the USDA to start an experimental farm in the area but shortly thereafter, in 1904, they partnered with Clemson College to establish the Coast Land Experiment Station at Hampton Park – near the Charleston Neck. A variety of crops were grown for trial tests, including pasture grasses, alfalfa, Egyptian cotton, 90-day oats, peanuts, flax, tobacco, soybeans, and the leguminous green manure Hairy Vetch. The Society had “general supervision” over the project and was assisted by W. G.

[38] *Ibid*, 174.

Garrison, a Clemson graduate. They soon expanded the tests to include more pasture grasses and soil building crops. The Society was enthusiastic about the projects and decided that more land was needed. They voted to purchase another 150 to 200 acres near Charleston that would be donated to Clemson for operation. Before they could execute this plan, though, the Southern Railway Company donated approximately 300 acres to the Society who, after legislative approval in 1908, handed it over to Clemson. The college surveyed the land, drained it, erected buildings and sunk wells. In addition to a state-run experimental farm, the Agricultural Society now had "a place ideally suited for holding old-fashioned stag parties."[39]

While exploring the potential for other crops, the Society continued to search for a cure to the Sea Island cotton crisis – even after WWI and the arrival of the boll weevil. In January 1922 they invited C.B. Doyle, an USDA cotton breeder, to give a private talk on the future of the crop in the Lowcountry. After the talk Doyle requested ten acres of land to commence his breeding work; it was "immediately" offered by Sandiford Bee, a prominent member of the Society. Doyle and an assistant started work right away and by April the project was in full swing. The USDA requested that the Society support an expansion of the project and, apparently pleased with the progress, they voted in 1924 to increase the acreage from ten to one hundred. They secured this larger tract for Doyle and appropriated $5,000 for infrastructure. He continued breeding experiments with not only Sea Island cotton but also improved short-staple varieties that would mature before the weevil could cause significant damage.[40]

The real significance of these cotton-breeding experiments is that the Society actively solicited (and then financially supported) the expansion of the agricultural state into region. This marked the beginning of a tight relationship between the Society and the USDA that continues

[39] *Ibid,* 177.
[40] *Ibid.,* 203.

today.[41] Beginning in the 1920s and continuing throughout the century, the Society allocated funds, donated land, coordinated labor, and petitioned politicians in support of USDA expansion in the region. They simultaneously cut back on their own experimental and scientific efforts, but their program of improvement provided the model for USDA efforts. In effect, then, *the Society outsourced its improvement work to the regional offices of the USDA.*

Though this evolving and powerful partnership could not sustain Lowcountry cotton and rice production, it was able to reproduce the plantation in the form of commercial vegetable production - the truck farm. By the early 1920s many Lowcountry planters believed that truck production was the best alternative, and in 1927 the Society finally abandoned the cotton and rice dream and proposed an experimental farm for truck crops. In 1928 Clemson College officials met with the Society, and the two parties successfully petitioned Charleston County for partial funding. As usual, the first step for selecting the site was soil analysis. In 1932 the Society purchased a 130 acre tract five miles south of Charleston and soon after deeded it to Clemson for use as a truck crop experiment station. A special committee of the Society hosted a grand event for the laying of the main building's cornerstone: in the stone was sealed a history of the Society, a package of seed, a George Washington centennial coin, and an account of Clemson's experimental work. This "monumental" moment perfectly encapsulates the material wedding of the region's agricultural elite to state science in the service of white nationalism.[42]

Just five years later, under the Bankhead-Jones Act, the USDA established a regional experiment unit for commercial vegetable crop improvement adjoining the Clemson station that

[41] The Society continues to fund small USDA projects, agricultural scholarships to Clemson University, and - perhaps most dramatically - the chief of the regional experiment station is always appointed as an honorary member in order to "keep them [the Society] informed about what's going on" (interview).
[42] *This Our Land*, 229. "New US Agency Nearly Finished," *Charleston News and Courier*, Feb. 21, 1937; "Truck Station Aims to Help Farmer Make Better Crops," *Charleston News and Courier*, Feb. 21, 1937

was responsible for research geared towards the needs of the "thirteen Southern states (including the eleven original confederate states plus Oklahoma and Arkansas)." It was the first federal agricultural improvement unit of its kind. It focused mainly on foreign crop introductions, including trips to India, Persia, and Turkey to gather vegetable varieties that could be used to fortify US breeding stock. Watermelons, beans, tomatoes, and cabbage were the initial crops that received the most attention.[43]

Together, the Lowcountry's reinvigorated plantation bloc continued to expand on the region's reputation as one of the most important centers of truck farming in the world. Cabbage, potatoes, and beans gained prominence in the 1920s as some of the most reliable and productive crops. Throughout the 1930s and '40s, Charleston County shipped far more cabbage than any other region of comparable size. With support from the Agricultural Society, USDA agents perfected varieties that excelled in the Lowcountry's unique growing conditions and that could also withstand long-distance shipping. Local African Americans continued to provide the labor. One account plainly notes that, "white men work only in the fields as foremen." The USDA experiment unit followed similar racialized labor patterns as did regional farms, with a racially-unmarked (so presumably white) "labor foreman" and "sixteen negro laborers to serve as farm hands."[44]

From Plantation Master to Farmer, Inc.

In addition to the struggles over turning freedpeople into willing subjects of capital, white Lowcountry agriculturalists faced their own internal struggles over identity in the wake of the

[43] "US to Establish Farm Laboratory," *Charleston News and Courier*, March 4, 1936; "New US Agency Nearly Finished," *Charleston News and Courier*, Feb. 21, 1937
[44] *This Our Land,* 226. Census of Agriculture. "New US Agency," *Charleston News and Courier*, Feb. 21, 1937

cotton and rice empire. As already suggested, much of the dogged attachment to these crops can be explained by the symbolic status and the exalted sense of self it conferred on white planters. But, as many in the Agricultural Society remembered it, by the 1930s "the term 'planter' was scarcely ever heard. In fact, there were no more planters in the old sense of the word." If not a planter in the "old sense of the word," what was the truck farmer? Was he still a "real farmer"? Was he even a man?[45]

Lowcountry planters understood themselves, first and foremost, as masters of a household economy. Their rights and duties anchored in ownership of large productive parcels, they approached their tasks as orchestrators of both commercial and domestic activity. In fact, in this model - which rose to prominence in the mercantile economy - commerce was rooted in the domestic sphere. While not usually literal family, planters often claimed to think of their chattel in this way. Slaves were clearly not thought of as employees, but as literally part of plantation property which was coordinated as part of the larger household economy. Thus, the masculine mastery of both nature and home were crucial to planters' sense of self. The planter claim to his place of dominion was often validated by sympathetic audiences through the belief that he orchestrated an "almost self-sustaining unit" and "produced much of the food consumed by their families and their slaves." Although an obviously asinine claim when one considers the fact that slaves provided much of their own food, produced virtually all of the planter's wealth, and kept the household in working order, this belief was nonetheless central to the planter identity and their broader project of securing hegemony.[46]

The truck farm was frighteningly unfamiliar ground in comparison. Even though the largest growers in the Lowcountry of the 1930s were vegetable farmers, they were generally not

[45] *This Our Land*, 222.
[46] *Ibid.*, 222.

referred to as planters, but "growers" or "operators". As one commentator put it, they "farmed by remote control". He also objected to the fact that many truck farmers did not live where they farmed or grow for their own table (planters rarely did either of these either, despite the myths to the contrary). They were now employers rather than masters and, similarly, truck farmers "handled all of their business through agents and supervisors." This reliance on others, rather than dominion over them, was troublingly feminine. Rather than master of the household economy, they simply hired someone when they ran into trouble. Above all, truck farmers "must be a keen business man, with something of a gambler in his make-up." No longer an expert on the domestic economy, truck farmers must be "an expert on market trends," one who studied crop conditions and prices "as carefully as a Wall Street speculator studied corporation earnings and losses."[47]

Many Lowcountry rice and cotton planters chaffed against this model of Farmer, Inc., and they often drew on gendered assumptions about proper behavior that portrayed truck farmers as lacking self-control. "Unlike the rice planters," one critic claimed, "few of them accumulated large fortunes. The gambling instinct was too strong…When their number came up they bought Packard automobiles, loaded their wives with jewelry, smoked custom made cigars, slipping hundred dollar bills to their sons for a spree in town….their way of life seemed to encourage recklessness." This was more than just a planter critique of middle-class consumer lifestyles, however, it was also a challenge to the manhood of the farmer. If driven by impulses rather than reason, planters suggested, truck farmers were neither truly masters of their household nor masters of themselves.[48]

[47] *Ibid.*, 224.
[48] *Ibid.*

Both the Agricultural Society of South Carolina and the agricultural state eventually worked to cultivate this model of farmer-as-CEO. One of the favorite improvement practices of the Agricultural Society was the production contest. Starting initially with prize contests among farmers for staple crop yield or livestock quality, the Society next offered similar contests for farm boys and eventually farm girls. At the 1918 annual Society meeting, member J.B. Morrison of McClellanville, SC argued that "the value of a prize acre of corn in a community is boundless." The most important benefit of production contests, he suggested, is that, "First: It makes the farmer a thinker. His mind becomes active, and he becomes a live man." The "intelligent, thinking farmer" is positioned as the embodiment of improvement, necessarily the opposite of the "negro laborer," whose masculinity is in question for not being an "active, live man." From the assumed universal human trait of emulation, Morrison suggested that when one farmer adopted improved practices, "the neighbor looked over the fence, *saw the improvement and began to think*." Offering a cash prize for production was simply the best way, according to Morrison, to "put men to thinking." These contests were also, of course, designed to cultivate a competitive subject. The beauty of these contests for agricultural improvers is that they encouraged competition amongst neighbors but also, and perhaps more importantly, with oneself. For too long the farmer has been "a non-thinker," according to Morrison, "especially the small farmer." He sticks with what has worked in the past, and after the harvest "he spends the balance of the year sitting around at crossroads and stores, discussing everything but agriculture." He reaps the same yield that his father and grandfather before him did, reasons Morrison, "and he is satisfied." Contests, it was hoped, stimulated "the live man" who could make "ten bushels of corn grow where only one grew before." A competitive farmer was one who not only contributed to the increasing the nation's agricultural production but also who

internalized this imperative, who was always striving for more: one, in short, who governed oneself.[49]

For their part, the South Carolina Department of Agriculture echoed the USDA in pushing the corporate model. In fact, the 1914 South Carolina Yearbook of Agriculture (see figure 8 below) directly quotes a long passage from the US Secretary of Agriculture promoting the "application of economic principles and of sound business methods." The section, titled "Business Principles Must Be Applied," blames farmers for "lagging behind" and instructs that the farmer, who is almost always assumed to be male, "should know at all times just how his business stands, what parts are profitable, what unprofitable, and how he should redirect his activities to assure success." The Yearbook proclaims the usefulness, indeed the necessity, of consultation with formally-trained economists. "All agricultural enterprises…are economic in their character, and yet it is true that up to the last two years neither the farm as such nor any institution or establishment dealing with the farm has invoked the assistance of the economist," the Yearbook laments.[50]

It is clear that the agricultural state in the early 20th century encouraged, for the good of the nation, that farmers see themselves as operating an "agricultural enterprise." As CEO, the farmer's obligation was to increase production by consulting economists. According to the agricultural state, all agricultural problems were economic in nature. This re-framing defines food production as the realm of technical experts rather than households. Thus the Farmer, Inc. model is corporate in multiple senses of the word, for it not only implies a subject that understands oneself as CEO but also one that identifies with and operates within the nation's agricultural machine: one who assumes debts, buys inputs, employs laborers, produces

[49] Walker, 152-53.
[50] *South Carolina Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1914, pg. 11.

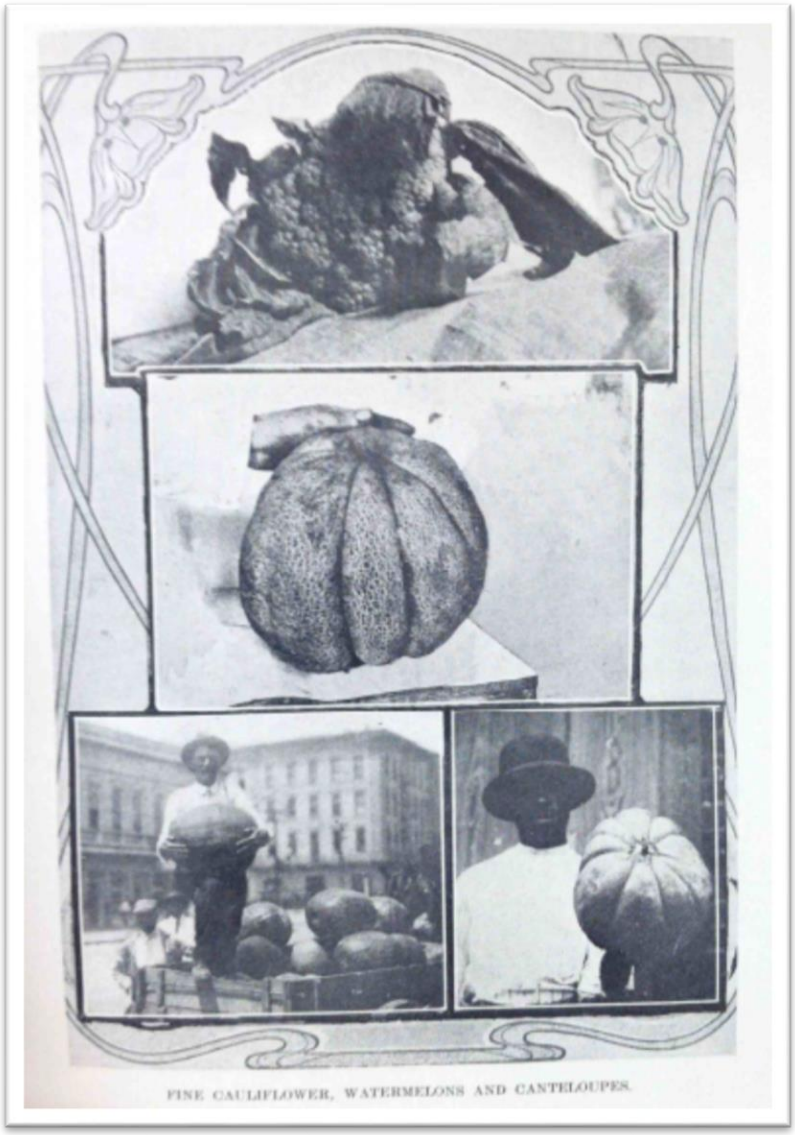

Figure 8. Images from the South Carolina Yearbook of Agriculture (1914) *promoting improved varieties of commercial vegetable crops.*

commodities for the market, and – most importantly – consults the agricultural state throughout the process. When Lowcountry planters objected to the fact that truck farmers "handled all their business through agents and supervisors," they were trying to protect their exalted status by questioning the integrity of the Farmer, Inc brand.[51] The efforts to cultivate both willing wage workers and entrepreneurial truck growers were projects in the service of the whitening - the "improvement" - of the countryside.

Reproducing Plantations

In addition to conflict over the proper role of the farmer, the early 20th century plantation bloc was also wracked with anxiety over the measured success of black farmers. While some state reformers feared the further concentration of land into "the hands of landlords of vast estates," the plantation bloc as a whole concurred that "what is *more* to be dreaded" is if additional land fell "into the hands of negroes" (1914: 21, emphasis added). The Agricultural Society of South Carolina and the agricultural state worked together to blunt the black push for landed autonomy in several ways. One of the most obvious of these was the farm settlement campaigns of the 1920s which, as the above quote indicates, were motivated first and foremost by the threat of black landownership. These programs make clear the racial politics of improvement: simply put, improving the farmscape was a project in the service of the white monopolization of land.

In the summer of 1923 the South Carolina Land Settlement Commission, a joint venture of the Agricultural Society of South Carolina and Clemson University extension officials, embarked on a nationwide tour of agricultural communities that formed the basis of their plan for

[51] For the growth of agricultural economics in the early 20th century US, see Fitzgerald (2010).

the "colonization of vacant lands."[ii] Their report to the South Carolina general assembly opens bemoaning the fact that "there are fewer white farmers who live on their farms than there were in 1910." The explicit goal of the Commission, then, was to figure out "how to assist the 38,000 white families who now reside on farms as tenants to become permanent settlers". Yet large, landed estates were not the answer either, but oftentimes a "hindrance". The state reformers' vision of a "permanent, rural civilization" was based on one of the most treasured of American agrarian myths - one of white male-dominated smallholding families. If more settlers were needed to make this vision a reality, the authors argue that for worthy recruits they should look - not to Lowcountry African Americans - but to "England, Ireland, Scotland, Denmark, Holland, Norway, Sweden, France, and Germany, the countries from which the best citizens of the United States came". Quick to assuage any potential anxieties, they reassured the general assembly that "no one would think of inviting the anarchists, communists, or bolsheviki" (*ibid*).

Yet Lowcountry planters were not content to leave this effort entirely to state legislators and reform-minded planners. The Agricultural Society of South Carolina led the founding of a separate "Land Resettlement Program" that had the explicit aim of maintaining large tracts of land in white hands. Rather than inducing European immigrants to adopt the agrarian dream in South Carolina, they instead engaged "the talkingest man" in the Lowcountry to market unprofitable rice plantations intact to wealthy Northern whites as private sporting resorts. Their efforts paid off, as Northern capitalists - who planters now deemed "friendly invaders from the North" - eagerly bought up large swaths of land along the Georgia and South Carolina coast. Many Lowcountry planters were employed as land managers on their former plantations, growing rice for ducks rather than for the global market. While this fall from grace was surely difficult for many planters to swallow it was not as bitter as one might suspect, for even if they

lost ownership of their lands Lowcountry planters took solace in the fact that the plantation geographies remained relatively intact and in white hands.

Conclusion

In many ways the promotion of the farmer-as-CEO fits within the broader narrative of US economic history that suggests a transition from commercial to corporate understandings of self in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Trachtenberg 1982; Wiebe 1967). Yet this broad characterization only explains part of the story, for "economic" subjectivities are always situated in the context of a much broader set of political dynamics. In the wake of Emancipation in the South Carolina Lowcountry these competing notions of selfhood were thoroughly racialized, and inseparable from elite white efforts to reproduce the plantation. Put simply, the cultivation of corporate farmers and willing wage-workers was not just a project of modernizing agriculture but also served to articulate racial and agricultural improvement in the service of white supremacy. More broadly, when situated in the context of notions of improvement, this analysis suggests that the valorization and cultivation of capitalist subjectivities is not just an economic project but also a racial one.

The dogged - and relatively successful - efforts of Lowcountry freedpeople to secure control over land and their own labor was always constrained by the realities of state-supported white supremacy. Through hybrid strategies of subsistence provisioning, part-time wage labor, and market gardening they carved out spaces of relative autonomy that lasted into the early 20th century. But the growth of the Lowcountry commercial vegetable industry in the 1910s and '20s - by renewing demand for agricultural land, increasing competition at the city market, and creating growing demand for seasonal wage labor - initiated the process of African American

land dispossession that continues today. Paradoxically, the desire of freedpeople for flexible wage labor fit well with the truck farmers' need for seasonal employees and contributed to the growth of the industry. The willingness of recently freed slaves to work part-time for wages must be understood, however, in the context of the significant constraints on their acquisition of land. It is likely, in this case, that freedpeople did not "desire" part-time wage work so much as they were forced into it because, even though they were remarkably successful in carving out spaces of relative autonomy, they still had inadequate access to land.

The incorporation of the agricultural state into the plantation bloc of the 1920s proved central to resolving the crisis of Lowcountry white supremacy that began with Emancipation. Though the USDA and the Agricultural Society were unable to revive the cotton and rice landscape, they were able to reproduce the plantation in the form of the truck farm. The specific geographies of white supremacy were altered, of course, and in undeniably significant ways, but the essential elements remained: white monopolization of land, enabling control over labor and black economic dependence.

CHAPTER 4

WHEN LOCAL COMES TO TOWN:

GOVERNING LOWCOUNTRY LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Between stops on a day-long farm tour, a Charleston County, South Carolina farmers market administrator boasted to me and others within earshot that she was going to "make Johns Island tomatoes famous again". She went on to explain that – due to a unique combination of climate and soils – Johns Island produced some of the best tomatoes in the world, and that in some unspecified "past" they had dominated the island landscape and the early-season fresh tomato market. Through her position as city farmers market administrator, she drew on this historical narrative and a vague sense of regional "agricultural heritage" to brand the local food system. This broad understanding of the tomato's regional importance is a common one in the area surrounding the port city of Charleston – commonly referred to as the Lowcountry. It is a myth, however. One that selects particular historical realities and crafts from them a very partial narrative. While not a reliable account of the Johns Island tomato, this instance of local agriculture boosterism does reveal several things about the spread of local food systems.

First, this mythology is representative of the extent to which the cultivation of local food systems in the US depends on the branding – indeed, the commodification – of people and places. The packaging of any historical geography is necessarily partial, and ultimately has the effect of homogenizing a complex reality. While soils and climate clearly affected the production of Lowcountry tomatoes, there are similar environments all along the eastern coast of the US. The 20th century growth of the tomato agribusiness industry in coastal South Carolina was just

as, if not more, influenced by the regional presence of a racialized and pliant labor force, existing agricultural infrastructure, and large-scale land holdings than by "nature" itself. Furthermore, this branding of place is no neutral affair, for, as in the above anecdote, it can easily link the past and present in a romantic and depoliticized manner. This episode represents the tight articulation of entrepreneurialism and nostalgia – what might be thought of, in brief, as "entrepreneurial nostalgia". I argue that entrepreneurial nostalgia is central to the cultivation of Lowcountry local food systems (and likely many others too); and that this entrepreneurial nostalgia, whether intentionally or not, often celebrates and reproduces a regionally-specific form of whiteness. This chapter argues that the growth of Lowcountry local food systems, in many ways a response to the crisis of tomato agribusiness, was infused with an anxiety about the future of whiteness in the region.

This chapter focuses on the institutions of Lowcountry agricultural governance and their role in cultivating the region's local food systems. While the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) remains important to agricultural governance, regional NGOs have taken a leading role in the promotion of local food systems – in the Lowcountry and beyond. Many local food NGOs see themselves as rooted in the interests of "the community" while the USDA is largely beholden to the concerns of agribusiness, yet these same NGOs also rely on USDA grants for a significant portion of their operating expenses. To the extent that their work must align with the goals and practices supported by the USDA, local agriculture NGOs have a contradictory and ambiguous relationship to the US agricultural state. The resulting form of governance, common in neoliberal restructuring, is best characterized as a shifting hybrid of state and civil society. In this way, local agriculture represents not resistance to neoliberal globalization but actually an extension of prevailing patterns. The shift from bureaucratic and industrial forms of production to

entrepreneurial and flexible ones, for instance, is often understood as one of the defining processes of neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 1992; Tickell and Peck 1995). But in their efforts to cultivate local food systems, the institutions of agricultural governance not only promote zoning regulations, administer farmers markets and facilitate networks of agricultural knowledge exchange; they also focus explicitly on cultivating specific kinds of farmers. This chapter examines the ways that aspiring local farmers are steered towards an entrepreneurial and nostalgic subjectivity – one that resonates with liberal and color-blind forms of whiteness. While I am empirically concerned here with the South Carolina Lowcountry, the color-blind nostalgia and entrepreneurialism that I analyze are arguably common to (and perhaps constitutive of) the broader US local foods movement. That these trends so easily reproduce a "commonsense" and exclusive form of whiteness suggests that they must be challenged in order to create a socially just food system.

Whiteness, Agriculture and Nostalgia

Whiteness is almost infinitely malleable and therefore notoriously difficult to pin down. Like other manifestations of racial politics, this is part of what makes it such a lasting phenomenon (Stoler 1995). The dynamics of whiteness, its continual reproduction, must be explained if it is to be challenged. Here, I refer to whiteness as a racialized form of subjectivity that is often understood as invisible. This invisibility is the product of whiteness being the taken-for-granted measuring stick against which others are compared. Thus whiteness is not analogous to pale skin color, though it is often related to it in practice; it is a set of ideologies, practices and forms of knowledge that are used to define normality (McWhorter 2009). This emphasis on subjectivity, ideology and knowledge should not obscure the material dimensions and

implications of whiteness. As a normative frame for understanding and acting in the world, whiteness brings benefits to those who can claim it and disadvantage to those who are excluded from its hearth (Lipsitz 2006).

Scholarship on local food systems has drawn effectively on the concept of whiteness to show how farmer's markets (Alkon 2008; Alkon and McCullen 2010) and other alternative food projects (Guthman 2008a, 2008b) draw on and reproduce notions of racial difference. Much of this work analyzes the geography of whiteness, showing how certain spaces are coded as white and therefore present subtle and invisible barriers to others while simultaneously creating places for white people to perform their whiteness (Slocum 2007, 2010). This work highlights the observation that local food systems are frequently dominated by white people, yet refuses the facile explanation that this is due to a lack of education or cultural appreciation in non-white populations. Instead, this line of inquiry opens up the possibility that there is something exclusive about whiteness which creates unequal and segregated food systems. In her study of food justice programs that target low-income people of color, for instance, Julie Guthman (2008a) demonstrates the tendency of white advocates to focus on specific practices of food consumption as the end goal, instead of structural inequality. Rather than questioning the relations of power which create uneven landscapes and livelihoods, white activists tend to ask why it is that the targets of their reform often refuse to embrace it. This desire to change what people of color eat and the linked failure to address systemic inequality suggests that activists are animated by "whitened cultural histories" (433) – privileged histories that allow activists to see themselves and their desires as the norm.

Alkon and McCullen (2010) use the concept of habitus, which they define as a "patterned set of thoughts, behaviors, and tastes," to examine "white cultural dominance" at California

farmers markets (939). They point out, for instance, that the farmers market habitus requires comfort with expensive (often European) gourmet cuisine, and that this familiarity works as a signal of privileged social position to others. This chapter outlines the habitus of Lowcountry local food production – one constructed from a nostalgic orientation towards the region's agricultural past and an entrepreneurial subjectivity – and argues that this style reserves the cultural and material benefits of local agriculture for whites. Critiques of whiteness offer compelling insights into the racial politics of food systems, yet their application to local agriculture has thus far been largely limited to the dynamics of consumption. Agriculture is a site not only for the production of food and fiber, but also of racial difference and social status. Thus, if local food systems are to challenge the inequities of global agribusiness practitioners must not only focus on the whiteness of consumption but also of production. By doing so, this chapter contributes to a more full understanding of both the practices and the broader role of whiteness in local food systems – and thus the possibilities for a more inclusive and just agricultural future.

Notions of "improvement" have long tied together the management of both agricultural production and racial hierarchy, providing an important point of departure for my analysis here. European conquest of the Americas, for instance, was justified by the self-serving claim that agriculture as practiced by whites would *improve* both the productivity of the land and Native American societies (Knobloch 1996). Similarly, slavery in the Americas was justified by the argument that white slaveholders *improved* the character of enslaved Africans by exposing them to agricultural progress (Roediger and Esch 2014). Notions of improvement are unavoidably normative to the extent that they identify a deficient subject (non-whites, in these cases) and a desired outcome (agricultural practices identified with whiteness and "progress"). Thus, as these

brief examples illustrate, US agricultural development has long been shaped by European norms of who can be considered a legitimate farmer and what a modern farm looks like.

In what many think of as the specifically "neoliberal" context which shapes US local food systems, the projects of improvement launched by governance institutions often aim to cultivate entrepreneurial farmers. As Harvey (2005, pg. 2) notes, neoliberalism is "in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual *entrepreneurial* freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade". Dardot and Laval (2014), however, highlight the fact that neoliberalism is never just a political economic policy favoring business interests, but is also a project of subjectivity – of cultivating individuals (in this case farmers) who see themselves as entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurialism is a central fulcrum of the articulation of local food projects in at least three ways: first, by placing primacy on market exchange and financial accounting it contributes to the further "economization of everything"; second, it necessitates the construction of a marketable image of the self; and finally, as an ideology of self-making, it deepens the valorization of individual responsibility and obscures relations of power. The discussion section of this chapter will explore this dynamic in-depth through analysis of the Lowcountry case, but it is important to recognize this as a trend that extends far beyond coastal South Carolina (Allen, 1999; Guthman, 2008b).

Along with entrepreneurialism, nostalgia is a defining feature of many local food systems (Autio *et al.*, 2013). In this sense, many advocates of local agriculture believe that it contributes to a more "authentic" way of life or that it in some way recovers elements of a vanishing "traditional" past. Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia broadly as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed….a sentiment of loss and displacement". As such, it depends

on memory and specific imaginings of time. Nostalgia, "in positing a 'once was' in relation to a 'now', creates a frame for meaning, a means of dramatizing" (Stewart, 1988: 227). As a way of drawing on notions of the past to create meaning in the present and orient towards a desired future, nostalgia is inherently political. It proves reactionary for many reasons, several of which are captured by Boym's argument that nostalgia often results in "an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure" (XIV). In this way, "unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters" (XVI). In the context of post-Civil Rights US, Geoff Mann (2008) argues that nostalgia is central to the "pose of innocence" that characterizes dominant forms of whiteness. And, as the history of the rural US South is dominated by violent forms of white supremacy, it is not surprising that nostalgia for a rural past is "a white idiom, not a black one" (Stewart, 1996: pg. 106).

Whiteness is a historical phenomenon that must be continually reproduced, and agriculture has long been a key site for that unfolding (Knobloch 1994; Foley 1997; Roediger and Esch 2014). Thus, this article questions the extent to which local food production is enrolled in the reproduction of whiteness, the ways this process unfolds, and the particular forms of whiteness produced. As this brief review suggests, entrepreneurialism reinforces notions of individual action, obscures relations of power and requires a branding of the self. For local farmers this self-marketing draws heavily on nostalgic notions of a traditional agricultural past which, intentionally or not, reproduces the "pose of innocence" at the heart of US whiteness – a presumed abdication from on-going histories of racial discrimination. The following section will explore the ways that these processes play out in the South Carolina Lowcountry, with specific attention to the role of governance institutions in the articulation of entrepreneurialism and nostalgia.

This research draws on interviews and participant-observation with local-market farmers, farmworkers, and staff at institutions of local agriculture governance - including USDA extension employees and two regional non-profits Lowcountry Local First (LLF) and Coastal Conservation League (CCL) which is the umbrella organization for a local food hub, GrowFood Carolina. All of the staff interviewed were white, the majority of them young highly-educated women. The vast majority of the farmers and farmworkers were white, and most of them were also young and highly-educated. Participant-observation was conducted at area farmers markets, on several Lowcountry farms, at NGO meetings and events, and as an apprentice in the LLF "Growing New Farmers" training program. I also draw on published print and digital promotional materials.

Entrepreneurial Nostalgia in Action

As a crucial element in neoliberal hegemony, entrepreneurialism is rarely questioned in US public discourse and is positioned as a win-win for both individuals and society. Indeed, it is hard for many to imagine a different reality. Many interviewees assumed that entrepreneurialism was an innate human quality and appreciated local agriculture for the potential freedom that it provided to express that characteristic – even if struggling to make financial ends meet was an associated trade-off. Entrepreneurialism was commonly understood as the inherently risky process of starting a small-scale and "creative" business venture from scratch. Entrepreneurs, then, were celebrated as innovative individuals especially endowed with a "spirit" that allowed them to manage high levels of risk and stress while providing a service to "the community". For some farmers, this individualism manifest as masculine bravado: one Lowcountry local-market farmer explained that some skilled and hard-working farm laborers simply "don't have the nuts"

to run a business. Competitive commercial markets were naturalized as the ideal mode of personal action and social interaction and, when combined with the valorization of individual choice and effort, this resulted in an acceptance of the idea that farmers alone are responsible for their own success or failure.[52]

Both the USDA and regional NGOs play a significant role in cultivating Lowcountry farmer-entrepreneurs. At the most obvious level, most grants to producers require that they prove their past economic success and future business plans. They also often include a component that requires producers contribute to broader entrepreneurial efforts within the community – for instance, by providing apprenticeship opportunities to train workers so that they can later start their own business. As one Lowcountry urban farmer explained, all of the grants for which she was eligible required that she include entrepreneurial training in her program.

Regional NGOs that support local agriculture do so under the logic that it will support economic growth and business creation. The Lowcountry local food hub, for instance, states that its objective is "to tap into the existing *assets* of small-scale agriculture to help create a stronger rural *economy,* spurring *job creation,* and building *capacity* in rural communities by connecting *farm businesses* to the thriving local food movement," and closes with the assertion that, "*increased agricultural production leads to increased economic activity"*.[53] This mission statement clearly indicates the extent to which economic logics are a necessary part of the rationale for local food systems. It is also important to note the broad appeal that the language of business has, where rhetoric such as "job creation" appeals to those across the political spectrum. Many programs explicitly tailored to technical farm production skills place business training as an equally, if not more so, important component. The LLF Growing New Farmers Program, for

[52] For a similar line of inquiry, see Dudley (2002).
[53] Quotes from the CCL website: http://coastalconservationleague.org/projects/growfood/. Accessed 1/5/16.

instance, provides training in "farm production and business planning," while the GOODFarming workshops offer "sustainable business and production topics".[54] The new farmer training program emphasizes rigorous record-keeping and business plans so that apprentices can better qualify for future private loans to start their farm enterprise.

Marketing is the element of local food entrepreneurialism emphasized most by both state and civil society governance institutions. The USDA, for instance, has two main programs that focus explicitly on strengthening local food systems – the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food (KYF2) program (see figure 9 below) and the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) – both of which focus almost exclusively on market development. The LFPP offers grant funds "to support the development and expansion of local and regional *food business enterprises*…and to develop *new market opportunities* for farm and ranch operations serving local markets" (emphasis added).[55] The ubiquitous KYF2 program is also a marketing initiative; its mission is "to support the critical connection between farmers and consumers".[56] GrowFood Carolina, the Lowcountry local food hub, is essentially a market-building institution working as a wholesaler to connect local food producers with regional retailers and restaurants. Marketing is also a key component of the LLF Growing New Farmers program. Workshops and training focus on, among other things, forecasting market prices, developing unique packaging and cultivating relationships with chefs and other potential buyers.

While this emphasis on marketing may seem an obvious one with fairly straight-forward implications, I argue that this commonsense understanding is precisely what needs to be interrogated. As I suggested above, local food marketing is not merely the creation of abstract

[54] Quotes from the LLF website: http://lowcountrylocalfirst.org/gnf-apprentice-program/. Accessed 1/6/16.
[55] Quotes from the LFPP website: https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/lfpp. Accessed 1/8/16.
[56] Quotes from the KYF2 website: http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/knowyourfarmer?navid=KNOWYOURFARMER. Accesses 1/7/16.

Figure 9. Logo of the USDA KYF2 program.

exchanges between producers and consumers but is also a process of self-formation and place-making – thus shaping people's understandings of themselves and the regional landscape in general. Again, governance institutions play an important role in these processes. LLF, for instance, often refers to farmers as "food entrepreneurs", "food system leaders", and "farm business owners" – labels which local food growers frequently internalize. In fact, farmers are often thought of as synonymous with their farm business. One LLF employee indicated this tendency when she argued that good entrepreneurs must "evolve their business model…you have to be willing to redesign and redevelop *yourself*". "Savvy business skills," she argued, are now more important than ever due to the high level of competition in Lowcountry local food production. "So who are you as a farmer," she continued, "A big part of that is the marketing aspect – how are you able to *market yourself*? And I think that is where the entrepreneurial spirit [is important], because entrepreneurs are always trying to *reinvent themselves* and put themselves out there – put their business out there. They take risks" (emphasis added). Again, many of the farm apprentices internalize this understanding. When asked about his interests, one LLF trainee introduced himself as "an aspiring entrepreneur". Another commented that the most important lessons were about "the marketing experience: what services are we providing?" The LLF apprenticeship training helped them to "differentiate ourselves," he continued, "to create other things within our market, so that we can look a different way" (emphasis added).

Along with this emphasis on branding, Lowcountry local food governance institutions also train "food entrepreneurs" by teaching them "the language of business". As one NGO employee argued, local-market growers "can talk about harvesting, planting, fertilizers and irrigation all day long but when it comes to 'profit-and-loss,' cash flow and lending rates they *shut down*. And they're business owners, so it's like having a conversation with a business owner

who can't talk business". The implications of this kind of training are many. Most broadly, training farmers in "the language of business" also has the effect of training growers to see themselves and the world in a particular way. The emphasis on differentiation among "farm business owners," for instance, both valorizes the image of "farmer-as-individual" and normalizes a highly-competitive market. Training in record-keeping, with profit and loss statements as the final product, also works to cultivate the ideal capitalist economic subject: the rational, profit-maximizer. The normative and prescriptive dimensions of entrepreneurial training were expressed clearly by one NGO staffer: "we're trying to make it a habit and a culture in [local-market] farming".

The Lowcountry landscape is saturated with romantic mythology, and food and agriculture perform heavy ideological labor in this regard (Van Sant 2015). The booming tourist industry that is constructed around the region's plantation past is perhaps the most obvious example of this. Boone Hall Plantation, for instance, claims that its stately entranceway paralleled by evenly-spaced rows of live oak trees embodies "southern heritage," and that the plantation as a whole represents "Southern romance and spirit" (Adams 2008). Interestingly, Boone Hall has recently turned to local food production; they operate a CSA, a farmstand, u-pick sales and two agri-tourism festivals annually. They aggressively promote their local-market agricultural endeavors as a part of the "proud heritage" of "over three centuries of farming" at Boone Hall.[57] This explicit branding of present-day local food production through appeals to an agricultural "heritage" sanitized of racial violence and general exploitation is a particularly dramatic example of "entrepreneurial nostalgia". Its blatant white-washing, though, clearly

[57] Quotes from their website: http://www.boonehallplantation.com/. Accessed 1/3/16.

indicates the ways that nostalgia for an imagined agricultural past reproduces the pose of innocence at the heart of post-Civil Rights US whiteness.

Boone Hall's entrepreneurial nostalgia is the same as that which is present in the opening anecdote of this article – the desire of the farmers market administrator to restore the mythical past of the Johns Island tomato. The will to restore defines the problematic nature of this idiom. In her nuanced treatment of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym develops a typology that distinguishes between restorative and reflective forms of the sentiment. "Restorative nostalgia," she argues, "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home, while reflective nostalgia delays the homecoming…*Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition*" (XVIII, emphasis added). Much of the Lowcountry nostalgia for an imagined agricultural past is clearly of the restorative variety – posing as truth and "proud heritage" – and it is this pose that facilitates "an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming" (XIV).

Clemson University cooperative extension, for instance, has partnered with the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation and the Agricultural Society of South Carolina to promote Lowcountry heritage crop production – particularly rice but also heritage varieties of cotton, indigo, corn and others. Many proponents link the practice of heritage agriculture to the restoration of an "authentic cuisine" (Bilger 2011), and do so with an eye towards fortifying Charleston's reputation as a culinary destination (Van Sant 2015). Leading proponents of Lowcountry heritage crop cultivation tend to celebrate the nineteenth century as the highpoint of regional agriculture and cuisine and some of the most evangelical and lyrical among them suggest that heritage agriculture can turn back the clock to a better time. "And with those crops and the careful tending they require," one proponent waxes, "a little of the nineteenth century landscape

will return as well" (Shields, 53). There are various reasons given for the downfall of an idealized Lowcountry agriculture but many cite the Civil War as the beginning of the end (Bilger, 44). Heritage agriculture enthusiast and chairman of the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation David Shields (2015) suggests looking to the plantation management of "the most expert planters" because they produced "comprehensive and self-sustaining agricultural enterprises worthy of emulation" (348-49). Similarly, award-winning Charleston chef Sean Brock argues that "the rice era – from 1680 to 1930 – was when food was most delicious" (Bilger, 52). As he understands it, "those crops just disappeared between 1930 and 1980 – that fifty year period when, I don't know…shit went south" (42). Celebrating 19th century plantation agriculture while positioning the Civil War as the downfall of some sort of idealized past clearly risks aligning with a reactionary politics. Similarly, understanding 1930 to 1980 as that period when "shit went south" also indicates a troubling partiality, in the sense that this was precisely the era of successful Civil Rights challenges to *de jure* white supremacy. While proponents of Lowcountry heritage crops are not claiming to offer thorough regional histories in their advocacy, they are nevertheless propagating a restorative nostalgia that yields a guilt-free return to the plantation.

All of Lowcountry local agriculture is not geared towards the production of heritage crops, of course, and many local-market producers are not as explicit about how their reading of the region's agricultural past informs their current efforts. Yet even those local-market growers who don't currently produce heritage crops are supportive of the effort. In fact, heritage production was understood by all interviewed as an unquestioned good. When asked why one would cultivate heritage crops, a young local-market grower who planted a small patch of rice seed donated by Clemson extension service asserted simply that, "we definitely have to keep growing it". While heritage crop production is perhaps the most explicit and dramatic example of

restorative nostalgia in Lowcountry local agriculture, it is only part of a broader habitus – a set of attitudes and practices – that voices the desire for an imagined past.[58] Farmers who do not plant heritage crops also expressed a similar nostalgia for "times past". One such grower argued that local agriculture was popular because "there is an awakening in a lot of people…or a realization that they are not always going to see this anymore, it is about to disappear, and it is…Our society is geared totally different than it was 30, 40 years ago. The whole mindset is different" (Moore, 31). Another echoed the common complaint that "we've lost a way of life, we've lost culture, an identity…" (ibid). Farmers also sense that repairing this feeling of loss is one of the main selling points for local food systems. [59] "We are just holding onto all these old traditions that are going to the wayside," one Lowcountry farmer proclaimed, "a lot of people I think like to buy from us just because they want to be connected to the land, they want to feel connected to their food…" (41). Thus the appeal to local-market growers for branding themselves and their work through nostalgic idioms.

The appeal to authenticity that characterizes many US local food systems is also central to the nostalgia that shapes Lowcountry local food systems. And marketing this authenticity is central to local grower efforts to brand themselves and their products. Boone Hall Plantation is not the only legacy of Charleston's aristocratic past that has latched onto Lowcountry local agriculture. In fact, the growth of local food systems has provided plantation owners with several paths to viability in an era of declining agricultural profits. For instance, many white large-scale landowners simply lease parcels of their property to aspiring local farmers – who are often

[58] The concept of habitus is drawn from Bordieu's (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice* and has been widely used in critiques of whiteness (see, for example, Alkon and McCullen (2010). In this context, habitus suggests the personal practices and attitudes shaped by one's social location, which then contribute to one's ability to navigate a particular social setting. Thus familiarity and comfort with a given set of norms, conventions, and idioms – including nostalgia – contributes to social inclusion and exclusion in an often invisible or unintentional way.
[59] The desire of local food consumers to re-establish a severed connection is not specific to the Lowcountry, of course. See, for instance, Zepeda, Resznickova, and Russell (2013) and Schnell (2013).

young, white, and educated but without the capital to purchase expensive coastal land. This arrangement allows the plantation owner to generate profits and maintain agricultural tax exemptions while avoiding the significant risks, costs and labor associated with running an agricultural endeavor. Others simply profit from the added benefit of marketing their authenticity through claims of long-standing "agricultural heritage". Similarly, agri-tourism draws on ideas of authenticity, supports the reproduction of Lowcountry plantations, and is often run in conjunction with local-market production. Legare Farms, for example, was founded outside of Charleston in 1725 by Soloman Legare – one of Charleston's earliest settlers. According to the current owners – direct descendants of Soloman – the plantation is "legendary as one of the oldest working farms in the nation" (website). The Legare's hire a farmer to supply a CSA, market "homestyle" jams and jellies, operate several agri-tourism events, and host military re-enactments. The cultural capital secured by its claim to a "rich tradition and history" is central to the success of the Legare Farms brand in local agriculture. Lowcountry plantation owners have successfully promoted their image as the bedrock of the region for centuries (Yuhl 2005; Edelson 2006), and are able to leverage claims to authenticity to capitalize on the growth of local food systems.

While nostalgia is less explicitly promoted by Lowcountry NGOs and the USDA than is entrepreneurialism, it remains an implicit part of the governance landscape. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the mural that dominates the street frontage of the local food hub office and distribution center in a post-industrial and gentrifying Charleston neighborhood (figure 6, below). The sweeping Lowcountry landscape with a solitary stately live oak in the foreground and a mid-century farm truck puttering down the single-track dirt lane evokes a quieter and simpler time. On closer examination, this nostalgic vision is buttressed by the

authenticity of rural blackness: the truck is driven by an older black man and the cartoonish produce is nestled inside a sweetgrass basket – a handmade basket that was once common among rural Lowcountry black residents but has since become a popular tourist souvenir and is perhaps the most iconic symbol of regional authenticity (Rosengarten 2008). The mural suggests, then, that local food systems can help restore the serenity of the authentic Lowcountry farm life – one vaguely located in "the past". But images of rural African American labor have long worked to calm white anxiety surrounding urbanization, Civil Rights and integration – suggesting a time when the region's racial hierarchy was more stable. Thus the serenity imagined in this mural is not only an effect of "the simple life," as presumed, but also of white privilege. As the street front of the local food hub – perhaps the most visible institution of Lowcountry local agriculture – the mural also indicates the extent to which nostalgia informs regional governance of local food initiatives.

"The Land we Have": Entrepreneurial Nostalgia and Color-blind Governance

As articulated in Lowcountry local food systems, entrepreneurialism and nostalgia tend to reinforce an individualistic and market-oriented form of agriculture that reproduces whiteness. The competitive, self-branding mode of entrepreneurialism encouraged by governance institutions and the nostalgic desire for the restoration of a sanitized agricultural past combine in such a way that, intentionally or not, renders local agriculture as a site for the production of a color-blind pose of innocence. While the valorization of entrepreneurialism naturalizes competition and obscures the existence of racial and other structural barriers, restorative nostalgia for an imagined past –

Figure 10. The sweeping mural on the Lowcountry local food hub office and warehouse in Charleston, completed in 2011 (above). Detail of the truck that serves as the focal point of the mural (below).

one that is in reality fundamentally marked by white supremacy and racial violence – creates an environment innocent to white subjects and at least off-putting if not threatening to many non-white subjects. An African-American community organizer, one of the few to attend Lowcountry local agriculture events, commented tellingly that there is a "weird mentality" around community-supported agriculture – one that denies the long history of black farm cooperatives and instead brands alternative agriculture "through capitalism" as a white success story.[60] Referencing the dramatic dispossession of Lowcountry black farmland over the course of the 20th century, he characterized the recent re-invigoration of white farm livelihoods *via* local food systems as a return of the "frontier spirit". White liberals unwittingly reproduce this "settler colonial" advance, he argued, precisely through agricultural endeavors that hinge on marketing a white-washed past.

Is it possible that local agriculture, in the Lowcountry and perhaps even beyond, is the new frontier of the 21st century – an act of settler colonialism? While there are clearly significant differences between historical eras and geographical processes, this is a question worth taking seriously. If local agriculture is a space not only for rejuvenating agricultural livelihoods but also for reproducing whiteness, then it clearly promotes the racial stratification of local agriculture's social and ecological benefits. While entrepreneurialism and nostalgia are complex tendencies, they are also easily-articulated to colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Goldberg 2009). In this racial formation, whiteness is taken as the unquestioned norm yet other forms of racial identification and group rights are dismissed as violating the principle of "race neutrality" (Omi and Winant 1994; Roediger 2010). Entrepreneurial ideologies of self-making that obscure structural barriers are hitched to restorative nostalgia in such a way that obscures Lowcountry local agriculture's relationship to on-going histories of racial inequality. Thus the pose of

[60] For more on black farm cooperatives, see the resources at: www.federationsoutherncoop.com

innocence at the heart of modern US whiteness is rearticulated through regional agricultural change.

As the dominant habitus of Lowcountry local agriculture, entrepreneurial nostalgia also sets strict limits on the political imagination. This is particularly clear in the realm of governance. Despite normative commitments to preserving small-scale agriculture and promoting racial equality, key figures in both regional USDA offices and NGOs envision only color-blind and market-oriented paths towards these goals. A Clemson economic development agent, for instance, insisted that he would only support a voluntary (as opposed to state-implemented) initiative for an agriculture-only zone surrounding Charleston. Even though he acknowledged that this would never happen because "market forces are going to be against you," he remained steadfast in his opposition to increased regulation of property use – instead placing his faith in entrepreneurial innovation. While he argued that markets were not the most efficient or just way to organize a society, he insisted (perhaps contradictorily) that, "based on markets and demand, people with good judgment can usually serve the needs of society through their own creative decisions". Thus this agent of the state based his argument against state regulation of land use, not in a valorization of markets *per se*, but in his belief that rational, creative capitalists can create the best society *in spite of* market limitations. This celebration of individual innovation reproduces color-blind governance in the sense that it proposes the existence of a race-neutral entrepreneurial subject and body politic – thus the legacies of historical and racial inequalities are invisible.

The contradictions and limitations of color-blind and market-driven agendas become clearer when racial politics is addressed explicitly. When asked about the lack of racial diversity in Lowcountry local agriculture, for instance, one white NGO leader succinctly voiced the color-

blind creed: “I’m not the kind of person that notices it [race], so I don’t really think about it”. This style positions itself as race neutral and thus racially-progressive, while in effect dismissing the lived realities of racial inequality – both non-white discrimination and white privilege. Addressing the role that slavery and share-cropping play in the Lowcountry agricultural present, another NGO leader grasped for words: “In a way you’re fighting 200 years of history, but you also have this history of agricultural success. Now, *some of the history…is…is…not the best…we don’t want to talk about it, right…?*” The discomfort this highly-educated white woman felt discussing racial oppression, despite a deeply-felt commitment to racial equality, is symptomatic of the liberal habitus of whiteness that dominates Lowcountry local food systems. She attempted to steer the conversation back to calmer seas *via* regional boosterism: “But the part we should talk about is that knowledge base and *the land we have*” (emphasis added). Yet this imagined land-holding community (the “we”) is an abstraction that functions – regardless of intent – to obscure the lasting legacies of racial dispossession. More simply, “we” do not have “the land”. Individuals have private property rights, and over the course of the 20th century Lowcountry African Americans have been dramatically and disproportionately dispossessed of their land – a reality that is obscured and reproduced through a color-blind commitment to racial equality.

The contradictions and limitations of this color-blind approach to racial equality are buttressed by the belief in market solutions. The figure of the successful African American farmer plays an important symbolic role in this logic. When asked about the possibility that many African Americans avoid local agriculture because of the historical association of farm work and racist oppression, one NGO leader suggested that “the more we can focus on models of [African American] success, then it’s not talking about the past but the future”. The telling assumption here is that African Americans might avoid local agriculture because of *their own*

discomfort discussing historical oppression – rather than the possibility that they avoid local agriculture because of white unwillingness to broach the subject. Celebration of economic success of an individual black farmer is commonly offered as the palliative for a crucial misdiagnosis: "Here's someone who's using this as an opportunity as a business owner, *regardless of his color*, this is a successful farmer". Thus, the solutions that flow from this framing of the problem are limited to a common form of liberal multiculturalism. "I don't think we have the capacity to overcome major cultural perspectives," one NGO leader argued, "but we can take an active role in *extending an invitation* to people. Saying we want to be *an ally and a partner*, we want to work with you so *we can show people [economic] success* and balance each others' strengths" (emphasis added). Yet, this belief that capitalist inclusion will achieve racial equality ultimately fails because histories of material *inequality* and disadvantage are reproduced through an inherently competitive economic system. It will clearly take a more creative political imagination to seriously challenge the legacies of racism in US agriculture.

Conclusion

While the growing importance of liberal NGOs in regional agricultural governance might portend a trend towards racial equality, or at least racial diversity, the case of Lowcountry local agriculture suggests otherwise. There are several potential reasons for this. For one, the USDA remains an important governance institution – especially in terms of funding regional NGOs. Thus NGOs must steer their mission and practices in a direction that is palatable to "the last plantation". Yet even when the agricultural state and regional NGOs aim to cultivate a more even agricultural landscape, their efforts are limited by an emphasis on market-oriented and color-blind solutions. Entrepreneurialism and nostalgia, at least as practiced in the Lowcountry, prove

to be particularly problematic styles that reproduce whiteness through agriculture. They also unwittingly produce an exclusive habitus that stymies racial diversity. Thus the cultural and material capital accumulated through local agriculture is generally reserved for Lowcountry whites.

This suggests several important things for scholars of local food systems more broadly. First, if one is to work within the conceptual framework of neoliberalism, examining, for instance, NGO governance, ideologies of consumer choice, or the cultivation of entrepreneurial subjects, it is important to recognize the extent to which these trends easily-articulate with colorblind racism (or claims to race neutrality in general). Similarly, nostalgic orientations towards agriculture are common well beyond the Lowcountry and this analysis suggests that they reinforce white-washed understandings of the past.

Svetlana Boym's work suggests one potential way to challenge the restorative nostalgia so deeply-ingrained in the American agricultural imagination, however. She argues that nostalgia can also be "reflective". If the restorative nostalgia that informs Lowcountry local agriculture attempts to reconstruct an imagined past and protects it as "absolute truth," a reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalence of human belonging, delays the homecoming, and calls truth into question (xviii). Boym's typology suggests that scholars might conceptualize and search for moments of *reflective* agricultural nostalgia – ways of relating to the past that embrace the uncomfortable reality of contradiction. Doing so provides a more supple foundation for efforts to redirect agriculture today.

PRELUDE TO CHAPTER 5, "LOWCOUNTRY VISIONS"

The following chapter was written to fulfill the requirement for "strategic communication" for the Integrative Conservation degree. The aim of strategic communication is to reach a broad audience outside of one's traditional academic and disciplinary confines. Since Charleston is perhaps most widely known today for its regional cuisine and has developed into a thriving culinary destination, I decided that I would reach out to this audience – perhaps most simply characterized as white "foodies". Chapter 5, "Lowcountry Visions" has been published in *Gastronomica*, a glossy academic/popular hybrid journal of food culture published by University of California Press that has a wide circulation in trendy food-lifestyle circles. The goal of the article is to communicate the critiques of Lowcountry whiteness and racialized systems of labor from the dissertation to an audience that might not think much about agriculture. I also hope that it will make readers aware of the failures of the liberal multiculturalism that dominates trendy food scenes.

CHAPTER 5

LOWCOUNTRY VISIONS:

RACE AND FOODWAYS IN COASTAL SOUTH CAROLINA

Matt and Ted Lee, James Beard award-winning chefs, rightly point out in their recent cookbook that "people all over the world see Charleston [South Carolina] as a great food town, and it's consistently cited by national magazines and television shows as a top dining destination in the United States" (Lee and Lee 2013, 12). The region's booming tourist economy is, in fact, nourished by the cultural capital that surrounds its cuisine. The tropes of conviviality and multiculturalism that found this culinary mystique, however, serve more often than not to obscure the realities of life in the South Carolina Lowcountry - the coastal region surrounding the port city of Charleston. The "Holy City" - as it is commonly known - has been at the center of national discussions about race and racism in 2015 after the murder of an unarmed black man, Walter Scott, by a white police officer in April and the massacre of nine black worshippers at Emanuel AME Church by an avowed white supremacist only two months later. These dramatic moments of overt racial violence demand much more scrutiny and redress, but this should not distract us from analyzing the more subtle and everyday ways in which racial ideologies saturate the Lowcountry landscape. Foodways - one of the most "everyday" of experiences - are a useful entry point for this task, and though this essay cannot pretend to fully capture the racial politics of food in the region, it is an attempt to begin this important task.

After the shooting of Walter Scott, Charleston Black Lives Matter activists interrupted Sunday brunch at “High Cotton” (Figure 11 below) — a fine-dining establishment in the tourist

district. Dressed in all black they led a dramatic four minute chant that recalled the names of black Americans killed by police and reminded the well-heeled and predominantly white group of diners that "white silence is violence." A few days later, activists used this "Black Brunch" strategy again at another Charleston restaurant that caters to those who want an upscale taste of "authentic" or "traditional" Lowcountry food. Their strategy is telling: by interrupting the everyday activity of eating, they aimed to dramatically make the point that the white-washing and commercialization of the region's cuisine is linked to broader historical and racial inequalities.

This essay draws from work in cultural geography and food studies to investigate several competing visions of Lowcountry cuisine. I argue that many of the dominant ways of talking about Lowcountry cuisine reflect the region's history of white supremacy, yet there are also hints of alternative ways to conceive of it. I examine popular regional cookbooks, which offer a unique window into the relationship between foodways and racial politics. The visions of Lowcountry cuisine embedded in these cookbooks are, in one way or another, claims about what it means to be *of* the Lowcountry. They are efforts to outline a place-based identity, and thus to *produce* a place. As Cook and Crang argue, "foods do not simply come from places, but also make places as symbolic constructs" (Cook and Crang 1996, 140). This line of argument, then, reminds us that food, identity, and memory are always bound together through specific geographies.

Examining the politics of "Lowcountry cuisine" - a set of culinary practices and ingredients common to the coastal areas of Georgia and South Carolina - is a difficult but fruitful task. Rather than focusing on technical matters - how certain ingredients and cooking methods

Figure 11. The upscale restaurant High Cotton in downtown Charleston's tourist district hails white diners.

come together in the kitchen - I emphasize the ways that the different meanings attached to Lowcountry cuisine are put to work ideologically: What kinds of politics do they support, and what explanations of the world do they offer? How do narratives about Lowcountry cuisine work to define place and identity? As Susanne Freidberg notes, "the reading of a food's story reveals...a much bigger story – *a cultural geography* – of particular times and places" (Freidberg 2003, 4).

Cookbooks offer an especially illuminating window into the cultural politics of food, oftentimes highlighting in surprisingly transparent ways the assumptions, desires and fears of their authors and intended audiences. I will draw on several cookbooks from the coastal South Carolina region, and focus primarily on the ways that race and racial difference are narrated therein. I argue that Lowcountry cuisine, often celebrated as convivial and multicultural, is in fact deeply marked by the region's history of violence and exploitation. The dominant narratives of Lowcountry cuisine – those largely cultivated by wealthy whites – consistently portray a deep sense of anxiety about maintaining racial boundaries and hierarchies. Their claims to authority are rooted in static notions of "heritage" and "authenticity". To challenge these self-serving claims to authority, we must first understand cuisine as an always unfolding struggle.

The cookbooks are also an important tool for preparing the landscape for consumption, both symbolically as readers visualize the region and literally as food is cooked and eaten. In this sense, then, regional cookbooks not only represent competing visions of the Lowcountry but actually work to create those landscapes in their own image. These efforts to represent and shape the region are not neutral and objective, and thus claims to know a place through its cuisine should be understood as place-making projects.

The Lowcountry and its Cuisine

Both the Lowcountry as a place and the foodways which are frequently used to define it have contested and multiple histories (Yuhl 2005, Edelson 2011). The purpose of this essay is to grasp the relations of power which are mobilized through claims to know food and place. Thus I focus on the common and competing *representations* of the Lowcountry and its food rather than on empirically outlining the boundaries of the Lowcountry as a region, or offering my own definition of its cuisine. In broad strokes, the Lowcountry is generally understood as the coastal region of South Carolina and/or Georgia.[61] It is also generally framed as a "Southern" place – oftentimes even granted a special rank within the hierarchy of sub-regional landscapes. Antebellum plantations and Fort Sumter, the site of the first shots of the Civil War, are two of the most popular landmarks in the Lowcountry, for example.

This geographic imaginary is aggressively constructed and promoted by social elites and the tourism industry. These dominant visions are contested, of course. As historians have recently made clear, conflicts over the Lowcountry past and its instantiation in the landscape stretch back to the era of slavery (Roberts and Kytle, 2012). For all these reasons and more, the Lowcountry is often presented and understood as fundamentally "Southern". It is also arguable, however, that the Lowcountry (and especially the city often cited as its capital, Charleston) is just as central to the national imagination. "For the first 200 years of its existence," Stephanie Yuhl argues, "Charleston enjoyed a prominent place in the American narrative" (Yuhl 2012, 2). In her compelling analysis of the making of modern "historic" Charleston, Yuhl shows how elite,

61 My approximation here is given only to orient the reader, as the purpose of this essay is to understand the contradictory and contested nature of place-making. Even this broad definition would be contested by some who argue that it extends into North Carolina, or others who argue that it does not reach into Georgia. There is also, of course, disagreement about how far inland it reaches. All of this, of course, is due to the fact that the concept of "Lowcountry" is socially-constructed.

white Charlestonians of the early 20th century highlighted the colonial, Revolutionary, and antebellum periods of the region in order to avoid parochial associations and to promote the city as "the ultimate repository of nationalist history" (*Ibid*, 14).

It is hard to deny that the foundations of the modern Lowcountry were forged out of 18th century landscapes of labor. The region arguably first cohered under the forces of slave-based rice cultivation (Carney 2001). In the 18th and 19th centuries the plantations which stretched along the Georgia and South Carolina coast tied the region into the Atlantic World economy, while the labor of enslaved Africans generated the wealth necessary to make the Lowcountry planter class one of the richest social enclaves in the world (Edelson 2011). The rice plantation economy also produced a region that was not only largely agricultural, but was also a population of majority African descent (Wood 1996). Although emancipation forever altered the shape of rice cultivation in the region, it did not end the Lowcountry's agricultural economy (Strickland 1985, 141-178). Many of the recently-freed slaves remained in the former coastal plantation districts and established successful truck farming operations, supplying fresh vegetables to urban areas in Northern states (Stewart 2002). The late 19th and early 20th century success of truck farming – especially when combined with subsistence agriculture and market gardening – allowed for relatively high levels of black land-ownership, and several scholars argue that it afforded Lowcountry rural blacks an autonomy which, however precarious, provided the foundations for a rich political culture from Reconstruction into the Civil Rights era (Hahn 2005).

Like many other rural areas in the US, the Lowcountry has changed significantly since the 1970s. Declining farm profits coupled with skyrocketing demand for residential and commercial property have ended the dominance of agriculture in the regional economy. "Where

we once had tomato packing houses and open fields," Gary Cohn of the American Farmland Trust observed in 2008, "we're seeing a new crop of houses going up for retirees and vacationers" (Halfacre 2012). Tourism now primes the region's economic engine and is arguably the most significant force on the landscape. In 2012 *Conde Nast* travel magazine named Charleston the top tourist destination in the world, after naming it the top tourist destination in the US the previous year.

As with many tourist destinations, the Lowcountry offers an official visage which obscures much of the conflict and oppression in the region. The constructed tourist geography of conviviality, elegance, and genteel pastoralism are a facade which papers over the Lowcountry's many layers of social division. This sanitation work is crucial to preparing the landscape for tourist consumption. In order to compete as a prime destination, Charleston and the Lowcountry landscape must be packaged, branded and sold to prospective tourists. Food myths are a central part of marketing the Lowcountry as a tourist destination, and the reality of a food history fundamentally marked by violence does not sell well. Thus Lowcountry cuisine is constructed and promoted as authentic, exotic, and happily multicultural.[62]

Narratives of Lowcountry cuisine, like those of the region itself, are multi-layered. Most of them offer vague allusions to the importance of history and geography; for instance, the region's proximity to the sea or its "multicultural" (read "colonial") past. These historical-geographical factors are generally treated in a rather superficial manner and celebrated as producing an intoxicating effect. "It is not European, African, or West Indian dishes specifically that characterize Lowcountry cooking," John Martin Taylor testifies in his popular cookbook,

[62] For an important review of the marketing and consumption of landscapes, see Mona Domosh, (2013) "Consumption and Landscape," in Johnson, N., Schein, R., and Winders, J., eds., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography*, First Edition, John Wiley and Sons.

Figure 12. The contestation of memorial geographies rose sharply in the aftermath of the massacre at Emanuel AME Church. The statue of John C. Calhoun - prominent slave owner and defender of the "peculiar institution" - was amended to read "racist" (top). The morning after, city officials dispatched workers to sanitize the scene (bottom).

"rather, it is the nuances of combination and a respect for the past that make the cuisine unique" (Taylor 2012). Similarly, another Lowcountry food booster gushes that "there are just a handful of cities in the United States that can vividly tell their story and show off their personality with their cuisine. Places where, with just one bite, *centuries of cultural amalgamation rush through the palate and come alive*. Charleston is one of them."[63] These recent commentaries on Lowcountry food draw on and reproduce celebratory discourses about the convivial and "multicultural" nature of the region produced by elite whites in the era of slavery. The fact that Lowcountry cuisine is a product of history and geography is uncontested, and I do not aim to challenge it here. What *is* contested, and what I will explore here, are the multiple ways in which understandings of Lowcountry food construct visions of the place and its past. Interpretations of Lowcountry cuisine that rest on multiculturalism fail because they sanitize these visions and then suggest that they organically coalesce into a singular representation. They celebrate commonalities and proclaim unity where there is in fact difference and contestation. In doing so, of course, they obscure the fact that some voices have historically been given more authority and a broader audience than others. By challenging these myths and further exploring the genealogy of Lowcountry cuisine, this essay aims to provide a firmer footing for the future of food in the region.

I will map the points of overlap and divergence in the cultural politics of Lowcountry cuisine through a close reading of *Charleston Receipts*, a canonical cookbook first published in 1950 by the Charleston Junior League; *Two Hundred Years of Charleston Cooking*, first published in 1937 by several of Charleston's wealthy white women; *Gullah Home-Cooking the Daufuskie Way*, published in 2003 by Sallie Ann Robinson, a black woman who grew up on a

63 http://www.eaglelatitudes.com/current/article.html?id=1360 accessed April 22, 2013.

rural coastal island; and *The New Low-Country Cooking*, compiled in 2000 by Marvin Woods, a self-described “northern-born” black chef who spent several formative childhood summers eating his grandmother's food in the Lowcountry.

There are many more cookbooks relevant to Lowcountry cuisine, of course. These four, however, are representative of several of the threads which will be traced in the body of this essay. *Charleston Receipts* and *Two Hundred Years of Charleston Cooking* are often cited as the “classics” of the genre and remain popular today among tourists and regional boosters. More importantly, they are also emblematic of many of the central claims of the elite (upper-class) white discourses of Lowcountry cuisine and are generally understood as authoritative and "authentic" accounts. On the other hand, *Gullah Home Cooking* and *The New Low-Country Cooking* are the two most serious and provocative attempts to challenge the dominant versions of Lowcountry food.

These four cookbooks are obviously from very different eras. *Charleston Receipts* and *Two Hundred Years of Charleston Cooking* were initially published before the Civil Rights-era, when overt expressions of white superiority were common. Robinson's and Woods's cookbooks are much more recent, both published at the turn of the 21st century. Yet a comparison between these texts is still useful for several reasons. First, they are all still used today (the older cookbooks are in fact much more widely-known); they are not inert objects frozen in time but living texts that smuggle ideas from their historical moment into the present. Thus, I compare these works as examples of different ways to conceptualize place, identity, and food: static or dynamic; inclusive or exclusive; organic or contrived. Though I stress the ways the more recent cookbooks diverge from the dominant narratives and provide alternative starting points, I do not argue that they are oppositional in any simple way (an issue to which I will return in the

conclusion). These cookbooks all broadly describe Lowcountry cuisine in a similar way. Important differences emerge, though, once one pushes past these initial commonalities. It is in these moments of contestation, which are only parts of longer and larger processes, that the paradoxical nature of Lowcountry food myths are most clear.

African Americans and Lowcountry Cuisine

In the cookbooks of the white elite, African-Americans' contributions to Lowcountry cuisine are both minimized and fetishized through the mode of paternalism common in the pre-Civil Rights South. While elite whites routinely suggest that African and African-American influences give Lowcountry cuisine exceptional "flair," they just as consistently deny the active and purposeful contributions of their black neighbors. In contrast, Robinson's and Woods' cookbooks place the skills, knowledge, and labor of people of African descent at the center of their narratives.

Most commentators on Lowcountry cuisine start by emphasizing its transnational origins, and this point of departure clearly highlights the diverging interpretations of African-American contributions. One version of the white-washed myth, found in *Two Hundred Years of Charleston Cooking*, argues that "it was by a *romantic accident* that rice was first successfully grown in South Carolina." In this narrative, a ship from Madagascar (a place supposedly "as remote in the thought of America as Mars might seem today") was blown off course and landed in Charleston for repairs. In gratitude, the captain of the ship gave Landgrave Thomas Smith – a Charleston resident who had boarded the ship (and since he is named and honored one can only assume is white) – "a small package of rough rice for seed." Supposedly, Mr. Smith planted it "in the proper marshy soil and there sprang up a crop so large that he was able to supply the

whole colony." Not only, according to this Edenic origin myth, did the "romantic accident" turn out to be a miraculously successful experiment but this encounter sealed the future fate of the place: "Thus from this storm-tossed ship grew the enormous rice wealth of South Carolina" (Gay 1976). Not only does this myth limit the African origins of this Lowcountry staple exclusively to physical geography, the rice itself – not enslaved peoples from Africa – produced the enormous wealth of the coastal economy. It is useful here to invoke Raymond Williams' oft-repeated insight that, "the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history" (Williams 2005). The "bounty of nature" motif, which in this Lowcountry version presents rice as producing, in and of itself, the cultural and economic landscape of the region, neatly erases not only the enslaved labor of African-Americans but also the skills and knowledge that they brought to the place.[64]

The cookbooks by Robinson and Woods offer a rich counter-narrative about the transnational and multicultural origins of low-country cuisine. Their framing still celebrates the transatlantic collision of food cultures, but it clearly reinterprets the role of African-Americans and begins the process of redressing the white-washed myths of the Lowcountry. Woods opens his cookbook by suggesting that not only is the African influence important to the region's cooking, but that it is in fact "the roots" of the contested cuisine. Perhaps in an effort to highlight the persistence of problematic myths about Lowcountry cuisine, Woods opens with a pointed directive: "First, let's talk about rice." Drawing explicitly from historical scholarship, Woods points out that English settlers knew little about rice, "but they knew of the skills of the West Africans." Counter to the Edenic "bounty of nature" myth which appeared in *Two*

64 There is now a well-developed line of historical and geographical research which shows that African skills and knowledge were critical to the successful establishment of the Lowcountry rice plantation economy. For example, see Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Hundred Years of Charleston Cooking, Woods correctly identifies the role of enslaved African labor in the creation of the Lowcountry landscape and its foodways. It was no "romantic accident" that created the wealth of the region, but the abilities of Africans who knew how to "construct the canals and dikes, as well as manage the intricate flood-and-drain systems." Woods insists that it was only through Africans' brains and brawn that "the large profits [for elite whites] of the rice called 'Carolina Gold'" were produced" (Woods 2000, 3-4).

The diverging interpretations of African-American contributions to Lowcountry cuisine are not limited to the question of rice cultivation, but can be read between the lines on nearly every page of Lowcountry cookbooks. The broader importance, of course, is not the technical issue of whether Landgrave Thomas Smith was the first person to toss a rice seed in the coastal mudflats of the American South. Instead, the critical point is to understand the implications of how talking about Lowcountry food is bound up with larger historical-geographical projects that make claims (however explicitly) about race and racial difference.

Food and Identity in the Lowcountry

Foodways, as glimpsed here through the lens of cookbooks, often contain powerful visions about a people and place. As the case of Lowcountry rice myths shows, the seemingly mundane can actually smuggle in powerful claims about what a place is, how it came to be, who belongs, and what their role is therein. Many of the claims made about Lowcountry cuisine are, in one way or another, claims about what it means to be *of* the Lowcountry. They are efforts to outline a place-based identity, to *produce* a place. It is useful to think of place-based identities as falling somewhere on a continuum between progressive and inclusive or reactionary and

exclusive.[65] Many of the elite white cookbooks draw a bold and tight line around who is properly *of* the place. On the other hand, Sallie Ann Robinson's vision in *Gullah Home-Cooking* is a radically open and progressive one.[66]

The elite white definition of place offered in *Two Hundred Years of Charleston Cooking* (see figure 13 below) promotes an organic myth of the region's cultural geography. In a section indicatively-titled "How this came to be," the authors celebrate the culture as a "flower scented" and "complex outgrowth of a long, slow mixture of peoples" (Gay 1976, ix). This depoliticized narrative of place has clear parallels to the "romantic accident" rice myth: the Lowcountry is a product of a smooth, natural process.

The text consistently uses the words "Charleston" and "Charlestonians" as stand-ins for elite white society. "In Charleston," the cookbook proclaims, "they still eat dinner at three o'clock in the afternoon." This, of course, was the habit of those few with such a leisured lifestyle, not "Charleston". The status of non-elites is clearly not one of belonging to the place. Again using the place-name as an exclusive euphemism for elite society, the cookbook argues that "Charleston does not like change." If these authors had included non-elites as a meaningful part of "Charleston," they could obviously not have made such a generalization. The symbolic erasure of all difference, of all non-elites, is totalizing in the central white-washed food myth. The place and its people, the author's claim, "grew fat and rich on rice" (*Ibid*, 42). For elite whites, foodways were clearly a way of defining who belonged, and in what role (see figure 9 below).

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65 On the politics of place-based identities see Arturo Escobar, "Culture sits in places: reflections on globalism and subaltern strategies of localization," *Political Geography*, 2001*;* and Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

66 For an extended examination of the potential for radically inclusive and progressive identities see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 1999.

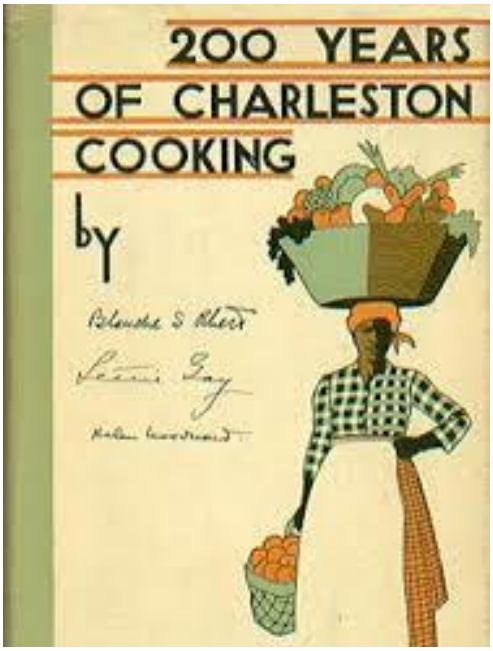

Figure 13. Original cover of 200 Years of Charleston Cooking. *Illustrates the ways that blackness signified an exotic authenticity for Lowcountry elite whites, a role that restricted African Americans to positions of servitude.*

The newest editions of the Charleston Junior League's cookbook removed many of the paternalistic references to black servants and cooks, but it still offers a clear, and clearly exclusive, vision of who counts as a *Charlestonian*. The opening words of the 1994 edition are remarkably appropriate, and drip with irony: "Some things about life in the Charleston area do not change..." The continuity to which the authors refer is a "noble" history of "gracious entertaining" and "lively arts." The Junior League argues that the recipes in their cookbook reflect both the "sophisticated" and "casual" elegance that has "marked Charleston throughout its 300-year history." This narrative of the Lowcountry draws unabashedly from the white-washed myths about the region and fails to acknowledge that many – arguably *most* – in the area are not privilege to Charleston's "gracious entertaining" and "lively arts" (Junior League of Charleston 1986, 3). The place-based identity laid out through elite white accounts of Lowcountry foodways excludes those who are not fortunate enough to lead such a "noble" life.

Food and place are tied together in Robinson's *Gullah Home-Cooking* in an identity that is designed to cultivate an inclusive and progressive future. Perhaps to emphasize her racial and cultural position, Robinson does not define herself, her place, or the cuisine she promotes as "Lowcountry." Instead, she uses the term "Gullah" – a common one preferred by many descendants of slaves on the region's coastal islands.[67] For Robinson, place is a lens through which to engage the contradictions and complexities of everyday life: "goodness and danger"; "joy, pain, spirituality, and love" (Robinson 2007, xvi). Her place is a frame for coming to know, and for constructing, an ethical worldview. "Home," she attests, "For some it is a place where they were born and grew up, and then moved away from. But for others, like me, it is *a*

67 There is a wealth of popular and academic (especially anthropological) literature on the Geechee and Gullah communities of the US South's coastal islands. Especially in the Civil Rights era, the sea islands gained attention as isolated pockets with distinctive and rare African cultural elements. See William S. Pollitzer and David Moltke-Hansen, *The Gullah People and their African Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999).

place where your navel cord was cut, and your heart often wanders to *the good and bad times you lived there*" (*Ibid,* xv). Food is at the center of this vision of place. It is a mode of defining place through food that is radically different from that of the Charleston Junior League.

Perhaps surprisingly, Robinson does not highlight race as a central component of her identity or her place. She does, of course, point out that Daufuskie Island was a black community, and that after being connected to the mainland with roads many residents became much more aware of the wider, and "whiter," world. She also wrestles with the changes brought about by the resort-style development that has recently engulfed her home-place, bringing in many more wealthy, white people. In the main, she identifies as Gullah, though also, as a child of the rural and coastal South. Reflecting back on her childhood in 2007, Robinson writes that, "Living on Daufuskie when I was young wasn't about the color of people's skin or whether they were rich or poor" (*Ibid*). Though race and class were undoubtedly an integral part of this experience, she identifies much more explicitly with her place and the lifestyle that she knew there.

Food and place come together, or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that they are in fact inseparable, for Robinson to define an ethic, a way of understanding the world, and a vision for the future. To start, good food – Gullah food – is home-cooked. And, as such, it requires hard work, not just in the kitchen but also "growing, gathering, and catching" (*Ibid,* 13). Good food is not commodified for Robinson, it is the product of communal labor and knowledge. Food in and of place is about connection to the broader world. "Food is life," writes Robinson, and she offers a vision where we can all share in it together, "whether you grew up in a high-rise or a tin-roofed shack" (*Ibid,* 12).

These Lowcountry cookbooks suggests that there is no monolithic or uniform "Lowcountry cuisine." While there are similarities and overlapping points, the differences are too significant to overlook. Foodways are much more than just the raw ingredients of cooking. The seemingly mundane does all kinds of ideological work. The different visions of Lowcountry food examined here offer a good example of this point. The Junior League used Lowcountry cuisine as a way to define themselves and their place as exceptional, or, in their words, "noble." The only Charleston that matters in this understanding of Lowcountry food is the elite, white one. The main purpose and style of their cuisine is to re-affirm status through conspicuous consumption. "*Charlestonians,*" the Junior League claims, like nothing better than the "casual elegance of outdoor entertaining beneath drooping wisteria." Their (read "elite, white") spacious porches and grounds "lend themselves to a grand gathering with silver trays, white-coated butlers and sumptuous hors d'oeuvres."[68]

A dynamic and experiential geography lies at the heart of Lowcountry cuisine for Marvin Woods. He argues that Lowcountry food should be understood as a part of the broader phenomenon of "diaspora cooking." Instead of a fixed *place,* this food culture is rooted in a historical *process* – the geographies of slavery and the great migration. For Woods, food and cooking are vehicles for exploring the past and present, for experiencing new things. As a chef, he emphasizes cooking as a "dynamic art" where one can indulge in and express "love and passion." Learning about African-American culinary traditions, not as a child but later in life, was obviously a formative experience for Woods and he offers a vision for food and cooking as vehicles for similarly enlightening experience (Woods 2000, 2-4).

[68] *Charleston Receipts Repeats*, Junior League of Charleston, 1994, unnumbered introduction.

The Gullah home-cooking that Sallie Ann Robinson outlines is perhaps the richest of all these foodways. It has a depth that clearly comes from a labored attachment, one that explicitly challenges the pretensions of status-seeking or commodification. Robinson's attachment formed through the experience of a daily life centered on the demanding but equally rewarding tasks of growing, gathering, and preparing countless meals (see figure 14 below). From this experience she knows of hardship and work, but also unrivaled contentment and blessings. It would be easy, but also a grave mistake, to dismiss her narrative as a naïve longing for the by-gone past. The tendency for scholars to label any appeal to the rural past as hopelessly romantic or even reactionary perhaps says more about their own positionality than it does about the complex and contradictory realities of rural life and those who live it. Though many modern commentators idealize the pastoral, all invocations of the rural are not the same. Robinson clearly longs for parts of the past, but she is no starry-eyed romantic. She acknowledges the challenges of her childhood and the advantages of the present. Through her experiences cultivating Gullah home-cooking, and, just as importantly, moving away from Daufuskie Island, Robinson has developed a food and place-based ethic that translates well across time and space. She argues that working collectively to grow and prepare home-cooked food is one of the most solid foundations for a truly convivial society.

Contradictions, and the Need for Correctives

How can we make sense of Lowcountry cuisine then, if it appears as so many different things? Does the multiple and contested nature of Lowcountry food collapse into itself, leaving us with nothing to grasp? I think not. We should, however, understand Lowcountry food not as a *thing*, but a *process* built on relationships of all kinds. Understood this way, Lowcountry

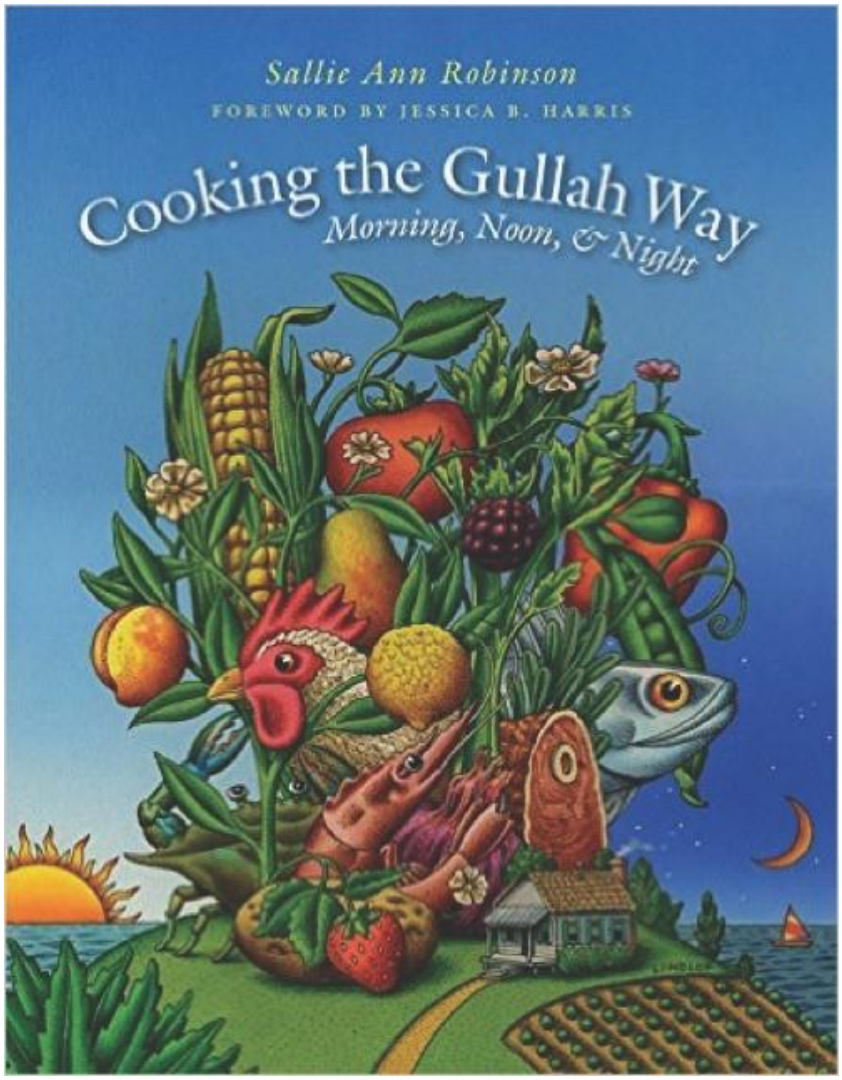

Figure 14. The cover of Sallie Ann Robinson's cookbook. Pays homage to the modest and homegrown nature of her vision.

cuisine is a part of long-standing processes of colonialism and racial slavery, and of integration into global capitalist markets and an urban consumer society. More recently, Lowcountry cuisine has been enlisted in efforts to market the region as a tourist destination through the revival of "authentic Southern cooking" (Bilger 2011). In all of these moments, claims about Lowcountry cuisine are bound up in struggles over the making of the place itself.

Lowcountry food is a powerful myth, and like the most powerful of myths it is deeply-rooted in historical realities. As such, Lowcountry food is a contested field where race and racial difference continue to play important roles. The works of Robinson and Woods offer promising avenues for challenging the superficial and exclusive understandings of Lowcountry food crafted by elite whites. They are by no means purely oppositional, though. They too occasionally lapse into celebratory forms of multiculturalism (though a much-tempered version), and as with any vision they have their own contradictions and constitutive exclusions. Robinson's challenge to the commodification of good food sits in an uneasy tension, for instance, with the fact that it is presented in the form of a commodity itself – a cookbook. My purpose in analyzing these cookbooks is to understand the ways that they represent divergent conceptualizations of Lowcountry cuisine, not to judge them as fixed and individual products. While there may be tensions in Robinson's argument regarding commodification, and her cookbook is definitely intertwined with the marketing of the region, it can still provide a spark for re-thinking Lowcountry cuisine. Those wishing to do so should take it as a starting point, not a manifestation of a "pure" or "authentic" cuisine. The most solid starting point that Woods and Robinson offer is the awareness that claims to know the region and its food must be grounded in an honest

reckoning with the continuing legacies of racialized labor that created the Lowcountry and its foodways.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION:

TORCHING THE PLANTATION?

"The Agricultural Society of South Carolina was not ready to give the country back to the Cusabo Indians."

- Murray, 1949

"If the plantation, at least in part, ushered in how and where we live now, and thus contributes to the racial contours of uneven geographies, how might we give it a different future?

- McKittrick, 2013

Whose Land is it Anyway?

This Our Land, a celebratory account of the Agricultural Society of South Carolina written by Chalmers S. Murray and published in 1949, both opens and closes with reference to the peoples native to the coastal region surrounding present-day Charleston – the Cusabo. Murray begins by narrating the initial Euro-Cusabo encounter as a friendly one: "the Indians shook their hands" (7). The Spanish inquired after precious metals and, finding none, "gradually faded from the scene". The French stay in the region was also a brief one. "They, too, overlooked the gold that could be produced from the land," according to Murray. "The English," however, "were wiser" (8). They established a permanent colony rooted in "practical" agriculture, "just as it had been with the Indians" who were also "wise and industrious tillers of the soil" (9). Murray claims that the ships that brought the first British settlers in 1670 also carried cotton and indigo seeds,

and emphasizes that the colony's first Deputy Governor quickly established an experimental farm.

While perhaps peculiar on first examination, Murray's use of the Cusabo as a framing device is quite revealing. As a transition narrative it serves the function of rooting white regional identity in claims to agricultural prowess. By positioning British settlers as a continuation of the Cusabo ("just as it had been with the Indians"), Murray stakes out a specifically Anglo-white regional heritage and authenticity. The rhetorical use of the Cusabo in the opening, then, allows Murray and his audience to validate the plantation geographies of Lowcountry settler colonialism as the progress of civilization, as inevitable improvement. Although Murray does not mention the region's indigenous peoples throughout the rest of the book (there are, however, plenty of paternalistic references to African Americans – see figure 15 below), *This Our Land* returns to the Cusabo in the concluding sentence. Despite the challenges to Lowcountry agriculture following WWII, the plantation bloc – full of masculine indignation – would soldier on: "The Agricultural Society of South Carolina was not ready to give the country back to the Cusabo Indians" (272). The rhetorical framing of *This Our Land* (the title alone speaks volumes) clearly articulates the stakes of contests over the region's agricultural future: they are nothing less than whiteness itself. This dissertation has challenged Murray's celebratory framing of Cusabo dispossession and African American dependency, but his linking of the two in the service of claims to regional legitimacy is telling. Agriculture has long served as the means for securing Lowcountry whiteness and racial hierarchy.

At a moment when the growth of local food systems rests comfortably alongside corporate agribusiness – rather than challenging its dominance – and racialized dispossession

Figure 15. Image from This Our Land. *These images evoke a sense of the rural idyll - from the planter perspective - and African American labor was a central part of this. For a white audience these scenes invoked a sense that everything was "in its place".*

continues unabated, the agricultural improvement efforts of the 19th and 20th century might seem an odd, or even irrelevant, point of analytical departure.[69] This dissertation has emphasized, however, the extent to which the current politics of food and agriculture in the US remain deeply-conditioned by the historical intertwining of whiteness and agricultural governance. Chapter Two, for instance, showed the articulation of national and regional formations of whiteness in the early 20th century practice of soil surveying. Chapter Three examined the ways white supremacy was reproduced through agricultural science in the Lowcountry's transition from cotton and rice production to commercial vegetable farming. Chapter Four analyzed the forms of colorblind whiteness that characterize the governance of Lowcountry local agriculture. Finally, Chapter Five examined the ways that histories of racialized food system labor are whitewashed in the region's culinary culture.

In the Lowcountry and beyond this long-standing and fatal coupling of whiteness and agriculture, from the agricultural societies of gentleman scientists to the USDA and regional NGOs, has relied on explicitly *liberal* notions and practices of improvement – ones that position experts as trustees of a deficient subject. This has facilitated the regional reproduction of plantation geographies by homogenizing both systems of knowledge and modes of production. The central role of improvement institutions is most clear in times of crisis. While agrarian studies scholars have paid significant attention to rural crises, they are generally conceptualized as narrowly "economic" – often framing the problem as a crisis of "accumulation" (Bartra and Otero 1987; Moore 2011). This dissertation has shown, instead, that rural crises are always broadly social; quite often, and especially in the US, this means that they present a challenge to (and are perhaps even driven by) projects of whiteness and the racial status quo.

[69] Scholarship on gentrification and the continuing legacies of colonialism point to new patterns of racialized dispossession. See, for example: Moore, *Suffering for Territory*.

The deep history of Lowcountry agricultural improvement also suggests that accounts of "neoliberalism" overemphasize its degree of divergence from the past. The USDA, for instance, has very rarely governed Lowcountry agriculture without allying and negotiating with other (nominally) non-state forces – whether the Agricultural Society of South Carolina, regional NGOs, or both simultaneously. The hybrid nature of state/civil society governance that scholars of neoliberalism often assume to be a new phenomenon is arguably better understood as an always-shifting trend rather than a linear trajectory or a radical break with the past (see Harvey 2005; Dardot and Laval 2014). The deep history of Lowcountry agricultural improvement also indicates that technologies of the self, often portrayed as a hallmark of neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002), are actually a long-standing mode of governance. In an important study, for instance, Pudup (2008) places recent community garden projects in the context of the deeper twentieth century history of "organized garden projects" and argues that recent efforts are "specifically designed as spaces of neoliberal governmentality, that is, spaces in which gardens put individuals in charge of their own adjustment(s) to economic restructuring and social dislocation" (1228). Yet she also points out that the deep history of community gardening can be understood as a response to "recurring cycles of capitalist restructuring" and that early 20th century garden projects had similar aims of self-improvement (1229). Thus, it is not exactly clear how recent efforts differ from their historical predecessors, or why they deserve the label "neoliberal". These recognitions do not necessarily imply that the concept of neoliberalism should be abandoned, but that analyses of "actually existing neoliberalisms" (Wacquant 2012) should pay equal attention to the continuity as well as the change that characterizes their object of analysis. Doing so will provide a stronger foundation for making claims about changes, and will perhaps illuminate some that have yet to receive adequate attention. One significant shift

that remains underexplored, for instance, is the degree to which the growing dominance of color-blind ideologies characterizes the history of neoliberalism in the US (though see Goldberg 2009 and Derrickson 2014). Indeed, US neoliberalism (and likely other variants as well) should arguably be understood not simply as a *laissez-faire* response to the crisis of Keynesian economics but also as a colorblind fix for the crisis of white supremacy sparked by the Civil Rights, black power, and global decolonization movements.

Empirically, this dissertation has also addressed some of the gaps in knowledge about the historical geography of the Lowcountry. Though the region figures prominently in studies of the Atlantic World, colonial, and early US periods, the late nineteenth and twentieth century history of the Lowcountry is under-examined. Thus, the existing scholarly narrative of regional social relations ends by celebrating the relative successes of freedpeople in their efforts to gain control over land and their own labor in the decades following emancipation. It celebrates the Lowcountry as an outlier to the patterns of white supremacy found throughout the rest of the US south. This dissertation, however, points to the need to turn equal attention to the cracks that soon developed in these fragile decades of relative black autonomy. The story that emerges, unfortunately, is not one of regional exceptionalism but of the Lowcountry continually, if gradually, shifting to mirror the deeply-racialized land ownership patterns across the rest of the US south.

This realization has implications for our current understandings of the region and its inequalities. First, I suggest that current discussion of the Lowcountry agricultural landscape must be situated in the context of racialized dispossession. The present is best understood by examining the ways that it rearticulates elements of the past - transmitting some in familiar form, reshaping others, and generally reconnecting them in novel combinations. While continual

dynamism often obscures continuity, it remains nonetheless. One of the most persistent historical elements is the way that institutions of agricultural improvement remain firmly-tethered to normative notions of whiteness. In order to make genuine steps towards a "just sustainability," these institutions must challenge the norms of whiteness that characterize liberal governance.

The region's broader racial inequalities should also be understood through this lens of dispossession. While most of the organizing around racial inequality by the Lowcountry political left focuses on the oppressions of the slave era and the unfulfilled promises of the civil rights movement, it has paid scant attention to the dramatic and racialized dispossession of the early 20th century. Given the central role that property plays in the reproduction of wealth and inequality, this period is a crucial one for explaining and addressing the shape of the Lowcountry today. This historical-geographical analysis could inform and complement efforts to grapple with *de facto* segregation, gentrification, generalized dependency and other continuing legacies of racialized dispossession.

Future Research

In the process of answering some questions this dissertation has opened up new topical and theoretical areas of inquiry. There is much more to learn, for example, about how the political rationalities and projects of agricultural improvement are challenged, appropriated, negotiated and lived out in different contexts. While this dissertation has pointed to the centrality of agriculture in the production of whiteness, it also begs the questions of whether and how this differs from other modes of making race. While some scholars have emphasized the racial politics of consumption in the modern US (Hale 1995; Cohen 2003), it is arguable that agriculture remains a privileged site for producing US whiteness. Whiteness is also "internally"

contested. “White people” who fall outside dominant norms are oftentimes threatened with the loss of their privileged identity (Wray 2006). This threat, and efforts to negotiate it, are clearly present in agricultural politics and represents an opportunity to grapple with the co-constitution of race, class, and other processes of social differentiation.

Topically, this research has inspired me to undertake a project that analyses the politics and practices of soil science in the 21st century. Soil surveys have been used since the early 20th century in the US for crucial administrative tasks ranging from agricultural planning to property tax valuation to regional zoning. Recent innovations in geovisualization technology have created new possibilities for soil science and land management, but they also prompt new sets of political and ethical questions. The growing support for military applications and the increasing-ambition of global soil surveying projects pushed by powerful nations like the US suggests that knowledge about not only domestic but also foreign soils has entered the geopolitical calculus. I plan to undertake archival and interview research in the US as well as field research in other nations to examine the political rationalities of soil surveys, the various interests promoting these projects, and their unfolding implications. This project will draw from political economy of nature and postcolonial science and technology studies in order to better understand the role of US soil science in global environmental governance.

Finally, there is much more engaged scholar-activist work to be done. If we are to “give the plantation a different future” as McKittrick suggests in the epigraph above or, perhaps more dramatically, if we are to “torch the plantation” – to incinerate the structures which support the white monopolization of land and attendant forms of racial hierarchy – we must conceptualize and enact *radical* improvement projects. As an initial effort towards this collective project, I suggest that we must first challenge modes of thought and social conventions which suggest that

it is *individuals* that need improving. Individuals should not serve as infrastructure for social engineering. Rather, radical projects of improvement must – among other things – facilitate non-hierarchical experiments in collective creation.

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