“Into the Hands of Negroes”:

Reproducing Plantation Geographies in the South Carolina Lowcountry

Dr. Levi Van Sant
Department of Geography
University of Georgia

"INTO THE HANDS OF NEGROES":
REPRODUCING PLANTATION GEOGRAPHIES IN COASTAL SOUTH CAROLINA

The South Carolina Lowcountry – the coastal region surrounding the port city of Charleston – has been at the center of recent national discussions about racial violence. In April 2015 Walter Scott, an unarmed black man, was shot in the back six times and killed by a white North Charleston police officer. Two months later an avowed white supremacist murdered nine black worshippers at the historic Emanuel AME church in downtown Charleston. Local organizers from across the political Left have worked hard to show that these recent tragedies, while terribly dramatic, are not independent events in an otherwise peaceful region but actually spectacles rooted in deeper social strata. The “Charleston Contract”, a visionary statement published by the Days of Grace Collective in the months following the violence, concisely lays out this position:

Much of the public response to the killings...has been driven by the need to rebrand Charleston (i.e. “Charleston Strong!”). Many people of good will, especially public officials, have promoted a myth of “Charleston Exceptionalism,” through which we are supposed to take comfort in the notion that the violence was visited upon innocent Charleston like a natural disaster. They have worked hard to dissociate good Charleston from Dylann Roof’s and Michael Slager’s heinous acts. Left unchallenged are the roots of their violence—the racism and poverty that remain so much a part of life in Charleston and beyond.¹

The racialized poverty that the Contract evokes is undeniable. According to the 2014 US Census, eighteen percent of the Charleston County population lives below the poverty line. While only twelve percent of the county’s white population lives in poverty, more than thirty-one percent of African-Americans do. Analysis of the region’s historical geography is central to an understanding of the Lowcountry’s violently unequal present. While most of the efforts to

¹ “And a Time to Heal,” *The Charleston Chronicle*, June 22, 2016.

organize the political Left in the region center either the era of slavery or the Civil Rights movement as the critical period in Lowcountry history, this article highlights the late nineteenth and early twentieth century dispossession of black farmland. By doing so, it emphasizes the fact that the politics of land is crucial to the geography of inequality – in the Lowcountry and beyond.

This analysis also has relevance beyond the Lowcountry as it engages with on-going efforts to highlight the centrality of racial politics to geographic processes, particularly studies of property and land use (Moore, 2005; Tuck *et al.*, 2014) While much of this recent literature is explicitly concerned with urban property and development (Chakravartty and da Silva, 2012; Safransky, 2014 and 2016), this paper turns attention to the lasting effects of rural land dispossession in the Lowcountry. I also situate the region's history in the context of the growing US administrative state and broader efforts to reproduce plantation hegemony in moments of crisis. I draw from recent work on plantation geographies (McKittrick, 2013; Woods, 1998) and the growth of the US development state (Domosh, 2015; Nalley and Taylor, 2015; Rosenberg, 2015) to elaborate a framework for studying racialized dispossession in the plantation belt of the Americas (see also Serrano, 2015).² While the particular geography of the plantation is always shifting, there remains 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 regional reproduction of racial hierarchy through the white monopolization of land and attendant claims to agrarian citizenship. The resulting social formation is shaped by improvement projects that firmly articulate whiteness (understood as a normative and unexamined racial identity) and agricultural governance.

² 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 1999, Greeson 2010, and Wallerstein 1988.

To explore this line of argumentation I draw on the archives of Lowcountry agricultural governance, specifically the regional offices of the USDA, the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, the Clemson Cooperative Extension Service, and the Agricultural Society of South Carolina. These collections reveal the assumptions, norms and goals of governance institutions, as well as the practices through which they governed. While scholars of US agriculture have long studied the importance of the agricultural state, the formative role of regional agricultural societies is not as well understood. These institutions have their roots in the British colonial era, when elite white men formed private networks for the practice of agricultural management and science (Drayton, 2000; Hodge, 2007). In many ways these societies of “gentleman science” provided a model for the USDA and cooperative extension, and are thus essential to an understanding of the US agricultural state. I also draw extensively on published regional histories (both academic and popular), historical and contemporary maps of land ownership, and census data to reconstruct processes of agricultural change and patterns of land-ownership.

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 multiple and haunting nature of the plantation’s geography (Prunty, 1955). Building from this relatively apolitical analytical tradition, Aiken (1999) conceptualized the plantation somewhat more broadly and introduced more concern regarding its social causes and implications. Scholars inspired by the work of radical Afro-Caribbean critics (Beckford, 2000; Wynter, 1971), 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 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 (2015a), 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. 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 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, as mentioned above, 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 formally state-led or otherwise, for the reproduction of the plantation.

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, ranging from irrigation engineering to financial training, are characterized by a “trustee” relationship in which expert knowledge is privileged (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 its role in moments of crisis. In moments of crisis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us, “dynamics are peculiarly apparent, and insofar as we can catch historical or contemporary shifts on the fly, we might recognize something powerful about race and freedom” (2002, p. 17).

Agricultural crises are not simply crises of capital accumulation but also crises of whiteness. Agriculture has long been central to Anglo-American identity (Allen, 1994; Foley, 1997) and white supremacy more broadly (Knobloch, 1994; Roediger and Esch, 2012), thus threats to the agricultural status quo often throw whiteness into crisis as well. Lowcountry plantation geographies faced perhaps their greatest challenge to date in the Jim Crow era of the early 20th century. While white planters and their allied institutions of improvement struggled to reproduce the plantation, they were also struggling to shore up whiteness. One white improver tellingly warned, for instance, that “unless our [white] weaker farmers are given such help to better their condition, by getting the best of their work, there is to be feared, more than at any other time, the danger that our lands will gravitate...*into the hands of negroes*” (Watson, 1914, p. 21, emphasis added). While reformers rarely resorted to such explicit language (they were, after all, either members of “polite” society or supposedly dispassionate technocrats), institutions of improvement clearly aimed to protect the white ownership of land.ⁱ

At times, as above, these projects worked to improve whites so that they could maintain the racial monopolization of land. And at other times, examined below, they aimed to improve African-Americans – to turn them into consenting liberal subjects. In both cases, the projects of improvement that eventually resolved the Lowcountry plantation crisis targeted the farmscape through the bodies of farmers and laborers. In this way, too, then, the logic of improvement was never solely about agriculture in the abstract, but also about race: improvement projects worked to create laborers and farmers (of whatever racial identity) that behaved according to the shifting dictates of a white capitalist order (DuBois, 1998 [1935]; Hall, 1986; Robinson, 2000). Framed this way, analysis of Lowcountry agricultural politics offers several interlinked interventions for the study of plantation geographies. First, it indicates the central role of regional power blocs and

projects of whiteness in the reproduction of the plantation. More broadly it argues that, if we are to “give the plantation a different future,” as McKittrick eloquently urges, we must challenge liberal notions of improvement (2013, p. 4). Finally, this line of inquiry reminds agrarian studies scholars that agricultural crises are always articulated in and through much broader social dynamics.

“A Struggle of Unparalleled Intensity”: Emancipation and the Jim Crow Lowcountry

“The South Carolina Lowcountry provides the outstanding example in American history of a society based on the aristocratic principle of excellence with inequality as its life-giving impulse.”
- H. Ravenel Sass, 1956

Written in 1956, as white racial rule in the form of Jim Crow discrimination was increasingly threatened by black freedom struggles, Sass’s *The Story of the South Carolina Lowcountry* is a celebration of the plantation and an apologia for – indeed a call to revive – aristocratic paternalism. “Equality,” he argued, is a “truly monstrous concept threatening our republic...only a polity based upon excellence not numbers can save us” (xii). While his anti-modernist critique of equality is no longer widely palatable, Sass’s characterization of the Lowcountry as a region fueled by “the aristocratic principle of excellence with inequality as its life-giving impulse” remains a compelling one. That his critique is couched in a nostalgic treatment of the plantation highlights the lasting power of that imagined geography for the project of whiteness (see also Alderman, Butler and Hanna, 2016).

Most of the Lowcountry planters that Sass and others valorize actually abandoned their coastal properties and fled inland in 1861, at the very outset of the Civil War, when Union troops took control of the area near St. Helena, south of Charleston. Many freedpeople stayed and bought or leased parts of their former plantations from the US government, attempting to secure

a meaningful freedom. Their drive for landed autonomy set off, in the words of historian John Scott Strickland, “a struggle of unparalleled intensity” (1985, p. 141). It is important to note that the Lowcountry had been a black majority region since colonial times and remained so after Emancipation: in 1870 the population of Charleston County was 88,863; over 60,000 were defined as “colored” by the US census. The vast majority of whites lived in Charleston, thus almost all of the small farmers and farm workers were black. This numerical dominance in the region, and especially the countryside, fueled especially high levels of white anxiety. During slavery, most plantations were operated by absentee owners so slaves had more time outside of the white gaze (Wood, 1996). Lowcountry plantations, for example, operated under the task system of slavery: after finishing a day’s task slaves had time to work in personal gardens and to hunt, fish and gather provisions. While this freed planters from the responsibility of providing food rations, enslaved people learned how to subsist off of the Lowcountry land and some were even able to market their bounty. Thus some Lowcountry slaves bought their freedom and many others accrued small amounts of personal possessions and even cash. In short, over a century and a half of bondage Lowcountry slaves developed a wealth of environmental knowledge and a sustaining moral economy that provided them with more leverage in post-Emancipation struggles than their counterparts across the US South. Once free, many drew on these agricultural, environmental and commercial knowledges to develop a hybrid subsistence and market livelihood that supported high rates of land ownership (Stewart, 1996; Stewart, 2005; Strickland, 1985).

While Sherman’s Field Order No. 15 – the source of the “40 acres and a mule” legend – never gave freedpeople ownership of land (only temporary possessory title that was revoked shortly after the war ended), Lowcountry slaves acquired land in several other ways. Many, for

instance, were able to buy parts of plantations that had been seized by the federal government for non-payment of taxes during the war. They also pooled resources and collectively purchased large tracts at lower rates than would be required to acquire the same acreage divided into many small parcels. In 1868, less than three years after Emancipation, for instance, a group of “about one hundred poor colored men of Charleston” formed the Charleston Land Company and bought 600 acres of Lowcountry land (Bleser, 1970, p. 18).

The relative absence of Lowcountry sharecropping, the most exploitative of contemporary agricultural labor arrangements, indicates the success of freedpeople in gaining access to land and control over their own labor. In 1880 the five coastal counties of South Carolina had a combined sharecropping rate of only nine percent, while the statewide average was more than twenty-five percent. Perhaps even more remarkable is the fact that almost two-thirds of farms were operated by full owners. These trends continue into the first decades of the 20th century. In 1910, for instance, more than ninety percent of the 2,700 farms in Charleston County were run by black operators: less than two percent of farms were in share-cropping while 48.9 percent were owner-operated (Strickland, 1985, pp. 156-160). Johns Island provides a revealing microcosm of these changes. In 1860 there were sixty-one parcels of agricultural land on Johns Island – all large slave plantations. But in 1870 there were more than 400 farms, and African American small holdings of five to twenty acres made up over half of all land holdings.³ Johns Island is the largest island in the region, the third largest on the Atlantic Coast and representative of land tenure patterns throughout the region.

³ *Charleston News and Courier*, April 22, 1880.

This landed autonomy, while certainly constrained and contested, nevertheless allowed many freedpeople to resist the most exploitative post-Emancipation labor arrangements and to develop a relative measure of freedom. As a Charleston newspaper reported in 1880, “colored men who ten years ago worked as field hands for 50 cents a day, now own their own farms and earn a comfortable support without doing day labor.”⁴ Historical scholarship on Lowcountry land, however, ends at the turn of the century – precisely the moment when African American landownership peaked. Despite the significant space Lowcountry freedpeople carved out in the decades following Emancipation, their vision of acquiring independent yeoman status was quickly and decisively dashed. In 1900, for instance, there were more than nine black farmers to every one white farmer in Charleston County. By 1925 the ratio was less than five to one, and by 1950 less than two to one. The trend lines march steadily across the century (see Figure 1 below). Today there are more than ten white farmers to every one black farmer. Land tenure patterns are similarly racialized: by 1997 more than ninety-seven percent of land in Charleston County was in white hands, much of it concentrated in large holdings.⁵

Only in a very narrow, and ultimately limiting, sense then could one agree with those

Figure 1. Source: US Census of Agriculture.

⁴ *Charleston News and Courier*, April 22, 1880.

⁵ All agricultural statistics drawn from US census of agriculture, Charleston County.

who argue that the rise of small farming and a black yeomanry in the late 19th century “set plantation agriculture on the road to irreversible decline” (Strickland, 163). The everyday threat of violence, increasing urban employment opportunities, and overt discrimination all drove southern African-Americans off the farm (Kirby, 1987; Schultz, 2006). Yet those well-studied forces do not account for all of the decline, and they certainly cannot explain the reproduction of the plantation. Attention to the assumptions and practices of the shifting institutions of agricultural governance is essential to doing so. Examining plantation geographies through this lens reveals the centrality of seemingly-benign agricultural improvement projects, which were ultimately a crucial part of broader Jim Crow efforts to shape the region through the production of racialized bodies, livelihoods and landscapes (see also Alderman and Brown, 2011; O’Brien, 2015).

Articulating Racial and Agricultural Improvement

The Agricultural Society of South Carolina was the dominant institution of improvement in the Lowcountry from the 18th century until it recruited the USDA and helped them establish a presence in the region in the 1920s. Founded by Thomas Heyward, Jr. in 1795, the Society was an organization of white planters modeled on and connected to elite European agricultural improvement societies. In an essay published in *The South Carolina Gazette* following the Society's founding, Heyward argued that "after having gloriously succeeded" in the Revolutionary War, "it is incumbent on us equally to endeavor to promote and enjoy the blessings of peace." The most productive way to do this, he argued, was to focus on "the cultivation and improvement of our fields" (Bostick, 2009). As an elite planter institution founded through settler colonialism and slavery, the Society was clearly a racial project. At the

core of this racial project was the normalization of whiteness – not simply whiteness as pale skin, but also as the curious (yet rational), intelligent and improving subject purportedly embodied by planters. That the improving subject is a white one is most often implicit, precisely because it is commonsense; to the Society and their followers it could not be otherwise. Thus what might appear race-neutral must be questioned because whiteness as the unmarked norm is central to the reproduction of white supremacy, in the US and beyond (Pandey, 2013).

Like other elite improvement institutions, the Society was not merely an interest group or fraternal organization (though it definitely was that, too); it was actively engaged in the Enlightenment quest for scientific knowledge (and mastery) of both humans and nature. Gentleman members of the Society were some of the most important scientists of their day (Stephens, 2000). They were, as Joyce Chaplin (1993) shows, part of "learned-culture and patronage networks that stretched across the Atlantic Ocean, and even beyond...Access to information about agriculture in other parts of the world...both reflected and reasserted the power that coastal planters already had over the region" (132). Birthed in the identity crisis of the early national period (Edelson, 2011), the Society established elite white authority through claims to plantation stewardship rooted in a mastery of scientific knowledge.

As part of their improvement agenda the Society bought and operated an experimental farm for production trials, developed engineering and drainage technologies, conducted crop and animal breeding, advocated observation and record-keeping methods, encouraged competition through prize contests, and facilitated knowledge exchange. Through these practices they promoted a specific vision of the proper farmer to white men. First, "he" must exhibit a certain kind of intelligence. According to the Society, improvement is needed to make the farmer a thinker because "he" is generally a "non-thinker, especially the small farmer...He is in an old

rut, and has been for ages.” He plows, plants, harvests and sells, then “spends the balance of the year sitting around at crossroads stores, discussing everything but agriculture. He has made ten bushels of corn per acre; his father before him made ten bushels of corn per acre; his grandfather made ten, and he is satisfied” (Walker, 1919, p. 152). The ideal improved subject, in contrast, cultivated a rational curiosity and a self-improving disposition. The Society worked, from its earliest days, to articulate whiteness and agricultural improvement through these idioms of intelligence, yet the post-Emancipation crisis of the plantation presented daunting challenges.

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 freedpeople’s resistance to the harsh conditions of what they referred to as “mud work”, increasing competition from new rice farms in the Southwest, and the failed attempts to mechanize Lowcountry rice production (Strickland, 1983). It was seemingly easier for cotton planters to adapt, although most of them were forced to switch from the treasured Sea Island fiber to the short-staple variety which was less susceptible to the boll weevil, but even then the crops resistance was short-lived. Still other planters switched to truck farming – growing fresh vegetables for distant urban markets in the US North. 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 (Shields, 2015). 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 white landowners. Elite whites desperately grasped for a solution to the plantation crisis that would

buttress their position atop the social pyramid; the expansion of scientifically-improved truck farming proved central to their eventual ability to do so.

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 (Stewart, 1996, p. 225).

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 2 below, also Watson 1908). 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 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 (Shields, 2015, p. 216).

Cabbage **BEET LETTUCE ONION Plants**

CABBAGE, POTATOES, BEETS, AND CUKES
IN SEASON—BY CARLOAD OR PACKAGE

CABBAGE PLANTS		PER 1000
2,000 to 2,500	-	\$1.75
4,000 to 5,000	-	1.25
7,000 to 9,000	-	1.00
10,000 and over	-	.75

WE WILL MEET ALL COMPETITION IN PRICES ON PLANTS

Lettuce, Beet, and Onion Plants		PER 1000
2,000 to 2,500	-	\$1.75
4,000 to 5,000	-	1.25
7,000 and over	-	1.00

Will Give You Special Prices On Large Orders. Plants Put Up In Bundles of 25 Or Over When Requested

N. H. BLITCH COMPANY, Meggett, S. C.
THE LARGEST TRUCK FARM IN THE WORLD

GOOD FOR 25c
Per Thousand
Off Regular
Price

N. H. BLITCH COMPANY
MEGETT, S. C.

Figure 2. Advertisement for the N.H Blitch company in Charleston County, South Carolina – the self-proclaimed “Largest Truck Farm in the World”.

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" (pp. 5-6). 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.

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 1884. 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 (8). The same qualities of truck farming also allowed growers to relinquish responsibilities to their hands after harvest season was over.

Yet, the hands that Oemler and other growers envisaged were no "abstract labor". He reasoned that "The negro must be accepted as the only practical solution of the labor question, 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" (pp. 7-8). 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.

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 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." Similarly, a white Reconstruction official argued that if black workers were given too much power, "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, 1985, p. 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. In the hands of Lowcountry improvers, 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.

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, p. 361).

Henderson's comments give voice to widespread doubts by white observers both North and South about the ability of black farmers to "intelligently" manage a farm. Despite the occasional "success story," almost all large Lowcountry truck farms were white owned.

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 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 (Murray, 1953, pg. 195-196). 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. Ultimately, the conception of the improved farmer as scientific experimenter gave way to one of improved farmer as agribusiness CEO.

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. 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 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 scientific experimentation 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 to disentangle the multiple causes of this decline, but labor shortages remained crucial. 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" (Murray, pg. 174).

From the early 19th century the Agricultural Society had pursued crop and production improvements on their experimental farm. But in 1904, they partnered with Clemson College to establish the Coast Land Experiment Station at Hampton Park – near the Charleston Neck. The Society had “general supervision” over the project and was assisted by W. G. Garrison, a Clemson graduate. 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. Ultimately, 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” (Murray, p. 177).

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 a prominent member of the Society. The USDA soon requested an expansion of the project and, apparently pleased with the progress, the Society 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 boll weevil damaged plants (Murray, p. 203).

Though they failed to solve the weevil problem, the experiments indicate that the Society actively solicited (and then financially supported) the expansion of the agricultural state into the region. This marked the beginning of a tight relationship between the Society and the USDA that continues today. 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.

Though this plantation bloc 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. 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 they 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.⁶

⁶ "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.

Just five years later the USDA established a regional experiment unit for commercial vegetable crop improvement adjoining the Clemson station that 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 and 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.⁷

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 labor patterns as did regional farms, with a racially-unmarked (so presumably white) "labor foreman" and "sixteen negro laborers to serve as farm hands."⁸

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 cotton and rice empire. As already suggested, much of the dogged attachment to these crops can

⁷ "US to Establish Farm Laboratory," *Charleston News and Courier*, March 4, 1936

⁸ Census of Agriculture. "New US Agency," *Charleston News and Courier*, Feb. 21, 1937

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" (Murray, p. 222). If not a planter in the "old sense of the word," what was the truck farmer? Similarly as the work of scientific experimentation was outsourced to the growing agricultural state, the plantation bloc was forced to develop new notions of improvement. Rather than valorizing the farmer as experimental scientist they now worked to define the improving farmer as agribusiness CEO.

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. Slaves were clearly not thought of as employees, but literally as 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 and their broader project of securing hegemony. Just as important was the notion of planter as curious, experimenting and scientifically-improving.

Truck farming was frighteningly unfamiliar in comparison. Even though the largest growers in the Lowcountry of the 1930s were vegetable farmers, they were generally not 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 claims otherwise). They were now employers rather than masters. They no longer carried out their own scientific

experiments. This reliance on others, rather than dominion over them, was troublingly feminine. Rather than master of the entire household economy, truck farmers often hired someone or consulted a state expert when they ran into trouble. Above all else, the political economy of agribusiness demanded that a commercial vegetable farmer be “a keen business man, with something of a gambler in his make-up.” No longer lord of 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.” As many old-school planters argued, truck farmers “handled all of their business through agents and supervisors” (Murray, p. 224).

Both the Agricultural Society of South Carolina and the agricultural state eventually worked to cultivate this model of farmer-as-CEO. Above all else, farmer CEOs must be competitive. In doing so, they 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. For their part, the South Carolina Department of Agriculture echoed the USDA in pushing the model of improved farmer as agribusiness executive. In fact, the 1914 South Carolina Yearbook of Agriculture 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, again 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 (1914, p. 11).

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.” And as CEO, the farmer’s obligation was to increase production by consulting state experts. According to the agricultural state, all agricultural problems were economic in nature. This re-framing defines food production as the realm of state scientists 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 agribusiness agent but also one that identifies with and operates within the nation’s agricultural machine: one who assumes debts, buys inputs, employs laborers, produces commodities for the market, and – most importantly – consults the agricultural state throughout the process. Rather than experimenting oneself, the 20th century farmer was to improve production by applying knowledge generated by state experts. 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. Efforts to cultivate both willing wage workers and agribusiness executives were efforts to continually adapt whiteness-as-improvement to a shifting and uneven political economy. These projects were so contentious precisely because they were necessary for the plantation bloc to reproduce white supremacy through the monopolization of land.

Reproducing Plantations

In many regions the growth of the agricultural state worked to disarm the radical demands of the early 20th century populist movement through the promise of technocratic

expertise (Rosenberg, 1971). In the Lowcountry, however, the expanding agricultural state blunted the threat of black landownership. Out of fear that “our lands” would gravitate “into the hands of negroes,” the plantation bloc initiated several efforts throughout the late 19th and early 20th century to recruit white settlers to the region. The crisis of the cotton and rice plantation had broken many planters and still others refused to take on vegetable growing, yet if black farmers claimed even more land regional elites feared white supremacy would falter. These programs make clear the racial politics of improvement: 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 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". Agricultural improvement, their logic suggests, would lead to an improved white race. 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 about other undesirable populations, they

reassured the general assembly that "no one would think of inviting the anarchists, communists, or bolsheviki" (*ibid*).

The state of South Carolina established a similar body under the direction of E.J. Watson, Commissioner of Agriculture, Commerce, and Immigration. In this capacity Watson compiled a promotional book, *South Carolina: The Garden Country of America*, that boasted of the state's "advantages of soil and climate unequaled in this country" (1904, p. 78). He directed his appeal to "intelligent" farmers, claiming that the state was determined to reclaim the glory of the plantation: "to restore her agricultural prestige to the imperial position it occupied a half century ago" (7). He specifically celebrated the growth of truck farming in the Lowcountry. "It is noteworthy," he argued, "that not only are native whites going more extensively into trucking each year, but a number of Northern and foreign people are doing likewise, and even intelligent negroes have begun the growing of truck for eastern markets" (72). The assumed racial hierarchy is obvious, but it is also important to recognize the (hesitant) belief that "negroes" could be "intelligent," if only they followed the model of the white agricultural state – if, in short, they were improved.

Yet Lowcountry planters were not content to leave this effort entirely to state legislators and reformist planners, perhaps out of disagreement over the possibility of improving black farmers. The Agricultural Society, for instance, 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 local African Americans or even 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" - 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 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 landscape remained relatively intact and in white hands.

Even today, over 150 after Emancipation, much of the Lowcountry landscape remains locked in the plantation grid. Figure 4 (below) illustrates the long shadow cast by plantation land-holdings over large portions of present-day Johns and Wadmalaw islands. The islands are only a few miles from downtown Charleston and are historically black and agricultural, like most in the region. Today, however, the population is majority white. Nearly all of the large landholdings are white owned and the rest of the island is undergoing suburban and resort-style development (again, almost exclusively white). Thus the white monopolization of land continues, even in what was once briefly the heart of African American landed autonomy (Carawan, 1994).

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. 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 continued control over labor and black economic dependence. The reproduction of plantation geographies in the Lowcountry suggests that, if we are to create a more just future, we must challenge not only overt discrimination but also the hegemony of liberal projects of improvement.

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ⁱ The white power structure across South Carolina, and indeed many parts of the US south, responded to increasing political agitation by rural freedpeople in this period with a vengeance, according to Omar Ali (2010).