Perpetual Mobilization and Environmental Injustice: Race and the Contested Development of Industrial Agriculture in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Brian Scott Williams
Graduate Program in Geography

The Ohio State University
2013

Master’s Thesis Committee:
Professor Hasan Jeffries, Professor Becky Mansfield and Professor Kendra McSweeney,
Advisor
Abstract

Many attempts to explain inequality in the Delta tautologically invoke "persistent poverty" as its root cause, obscuring the continuities between historical exploitation and industrial agriculture in the present day. In contrast, I argue that agro-industry in the Delta is productive of environmental and social injustice, and that this injustice is confronted by black agricultural practice. A careful historical exploration of agro-industrial development avoids historical disjuncture by emphasizing the continuity between injustice in the past and injustice in the present. Food insecurity and environmental toxins are produced along with the region's high yields of cotton, corn, rice and soybeans. Agro-industry presents obstacles to a more socially just agriculture in the Delta—land ownership is highly concentrated, aerial herbicide application kills adjacent vegetable crops and a disarticulated food system hinders marketing possibilities—while producing health and income inequalities. In this thesis, I explore the historical roots of contemporary injustices, showing that the dominance of a particular form of industrial agriculture in the Delta was hardly an inevitability of agricultural 'modernization'. Rather, industrial agriculture in the Delta was developed as a strategic technology of racial differentiation, political control, and economic exploitation. For this reason, the historical opposition of the agricultural development state to black independence shapes the technologies and distribution of environmental injustice in the present day.
Acknowledgments

This thesis would be far less than what it is had I not been challenged by the farmers and activists I interviewed over the course of my research. I am indebted to them for their insights and openness. The intellectual guidance provided by my committee members shape not only this thesis, but will continue to shape my academic career long after I leave Ohio State. Professor Kendra McSweeney has provided me with the perfect balance of direction and intellectual freedom. She has been far more generous with her time and wisdom than any Master’s student could expect from an advisor.
Vita

2004.................................................................Jackson Academy

2008.................................................................B.A. Anthropology, The University of Southern Mississippi

2011 to present.................................................University Fellow and Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of Geography, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Geography
Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgments.............................................................................................................. iii

Vita..................................................................................................................................... iv

Table of Contents ................................................................................................................ v

List of Figures .................................................................................................................. viii

Chapter 1: Race and the Development of Agro-Industry in the Mississippi Delta .......... 1

   I. Introduction .............................................................................................................. 1

   II. Research Development ....................................................................................... 4

   III. Theoretical Influences ....................................................................................... 8

   IV. Sources ............................................................................................................... 14

   V. Thesis Structure ................................................................................................. 16

   VI. Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 20

Chapter 2: Alfred Holt Stone and “Racial Competition” as a Strategy ......................... 23

   I. Introduction ......................................................................................................... 23

   II. Racial Difference as Agricultural Practice ...................................................... 26
II. Fannie Lou Hamer ........................................................................................................ 128

III. The Mississippi Freedom Labor Union ..................................................................... 132

IV. Survival and Beyond ................................................................................................. 135

V. Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 141

Chapter 6: Conclusion .................................................................................................. 143

References ..................................................................................................................... 150
List of Figures

Figure 1. Poisoning ........................................................................................................... 53
Figure 2. “Organized, Unified, Co-ordinated” ................................................................. 69
Figure 3. Research methods .............................................................................................. 79
Figure 4. The cost-price squeeze ...................................................................................... 90
Figure 5. The view from above ......................................................................................... 93
Chapter 1: Race and the Development of Agro-Industry in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta

I. Introduction

In this thesis, I examine the roles of white supremacy and black resistance in the development of industrial agriculture. I focus on the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta—a fertile alluvial valley in Mississippi constituted by the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers and their tributaries—in order to examine the development of industrial agriculture and the formation of race. Industrial agriculture, I argue, was developed in the Delta as a product of regional racial formations of white supremacy, and is itself formative of race in the present day. Because the continued production of racial inequality through agriculture remains undertheorized, it has been difficult to engage substantively with the processes by which industrial agriculture reproduces racial inequality in the present day. For this reason, this thesis is an interrogation of the ways in which the historical relations of plantation agriculture have produced social and material inequality through industrial agriculture.

In popular representations—from travel guides to USDA accounts—the Delta is territorialized as a place where industrial agriculture is dominant even as it is naturalized as a region stuck in the past and characterized by “persistent racial inequality.” This construction of “the Delta” frames industrial agriculture as disjuncture, rather than a
continuation of past exploitation. This particular narrative of change presents industrial agriculture as a more-or-less inevitable force, flattening the many registers of racial exploitation in agriculture, as well as the substantial black resistance to this exploitation. In contrast, I argue that white-controlled research and development in Delta agriculture bears the mark of black resistance to the supposed inevitabilities of agrarian change. The material and social relations of industrial agriculture, as I will demonstrate, are shaped by a white elite fear of black power in landownership and labor. The plantation-cum-agro-industrial project, dependent upon the control of land and resources, is threatened by an empowered workforce and by independent black farmers. In the process, the Delta has been constructed through agricultural development as a region that is hostile to black welfare and independence. By focusing on the historical development of the social relations and material forces of agriculture in the Delta, I expand theoretical understandings of the material racial politics of agro-industry in the supposedly post-racial 21st century.

Essentialist constructions of agriculture privilege “the farm” and “the consumer,” decoupling consumption from production. I interrogate this separation through attention to the historical development of Delta agriculture, showing the ideologically-fraught nature of these romanticized sites. In the process, I will position agriculture in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta as an issue of environmental (in)justice while moving beyond essentialist understandings of race in agri-food scholarship. With the notable exception of Jill Lindsey Harrison's book *Pesticide Drift and the Pursuit of Environmental Justice*, environmental justice scholarship in the Global North has largely ignored agriculture as a
site of environmental injustice. This is a consequential gap in the literature, since an environmental justice approach to agriculture can serve to bridge scholarship on environmental justice with the growing body of literature on food justice. Similarly, I hope to provide a corrective to essentialist approaches to race employed in the vast majority of agri-food scholarship. Although agri-food scholars are beginning to pay long-overdue attention to the importance of race and class in structuring access to food as the means for the reproduction of life and the agri-food system as a site of livelihoods, race is often treated as a given and static variable that simply needs to be added to the recipe. Given the “unbearable whiteness of sustainable agriculture”—to borrow Julie Guthman's piercing phrase1—these static, functionalist approaches to race ignore the dynamic role of historical racial struggle in structuring the food system as it is today. The agri-food system has been developed through racial exploitation, and racialization has occurred through the agri-food system. Patterns of racial inequality in the agri-food system cannot be adequately approached without an understanding of the process of racialization and the historical development of these inequalities.

This thesis also offers a corrective to the monumentalist argument that mechanization shattered the old agricultural and racial order in the Delta and elsewhere. In the South, an idea that there is a clear “before” and “after” to the civil rights era serves to obscure the processes through which agricultural development was profoundly shaped by white supremacist epistemologies not limited to control of the ballot box. My focus

---

on the interconnections of civil rights and Black Power in Delta agriculture represents a third contribution to agri-food scholarship, which lags well behind decades of activism.

White supremacist agrarian epistemologies have shaped the material forces of agriculture to continually reproduce inequalities in the Delta. At the same time, some aspects of white supremacist ideology have been maintained and sharpened so that they can function without explicit reference to race. My objective is to trace the material injustices of Delta agriculture, and to explore formations of race assembled in relation to agriculture in the Delta. In a similar way that the essentialization of race obscures the racial politics of agriculture, the perioditization of history insulates contemporary power from meaningful critiques of the ways in which it is constituted by a brutal past. White supremacists, I will argue, were developing the political techniques of neoliberal agriculture at the federal level in the decades before integration. This national agricultural politics, moreover, was interwoven with changing social, technological and material shifts in Delta agriculture.

II. Research Development

This thesis stems from my own fascination with the Mississippi Delta and a desire to join the struggle for racial justice in the South. The current incarnation of this thesis was shaped by my fieldwork experience in the summer of 2012. My research was, at the outset, centered upon the “black farmer” as my object of inquiry. According to an early project summary, I intended to engage in “interview-based research on the strategies and impacts of African-American farming cooperatives in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.” This
framing proved to be tremendously limiting. My belief that I could take the “black farmer” as a meaningful and knowable ontological subject, and then contextualize that subject within political-economic forces, was remarkably reductive. Fortunately, if painfully, my research was confounded by the practice of research—or, more precisely, the refusal of the farmers I interviewed to fit within my tidy categories. I took racial identity as a static and given thing, and in the process flattened the incredible diversity of agricultural practice among the people I interviewed.

Along the way, I slowly became convinced that my focus needed to be on the role of racial formations in structuring opportunities and creating the landscape of the Delta in the present day. Instead of taking agro-industry and race as ontological realities, I shifted my attention towards the historical co-production of industrial agriculture and racial inequality. I have done a poor job of explicitly weaving my fieldwork into the pages that follow, but the people I met and interviewed have done more to shift my research and theory than any book I have read. Because of its emphasis on historical processes, these exchanges are largely invisible in this thesis, but I intend this document as a means of working toward a more meaningful engagement in the future. With more time and space, I hope to more substantively write about the connections between the past and the present, between historical process and contemporary practice, and between the formations of race and the contemporary functions of identity. Although this thesis is thoroughly imbued with the implicit theory and the insights that confounded my fieldwork, the profound role that my interviewees played in shaping the research remains largely concealed. I am working to deconstruct my own essentialist understanding of
agriculture, region and identity, and am still chasing after the insights of the farmers I interviewed. This thesis is an initial step along that path, and should therefore be read as a prelude—in terms of both theory and empirical content.

The research within this thesis is animated by my frustration with the essentialism of my initial approach to race in agriculture, as well as a frustration with the limitations of the institutional definition of racial discrimination exercised by the USDA. As Eddie Carthan, an ex-farmer and activist reminded me:

...discrimination in any form, unless it's blatant or obvious is very difficult to prove. You know it's there, but sometime you don't have the evidence of...the tangible evidence to say “this is this”, “this is that”, because it's done in a way that is not easily detected, but it's there, and you see the symptoms and the results. Just to give you an example, in Pigford I, we had to prove that we were discriminated against, and the proof that they was asking for; we had to point out white farmers who got loans at the time that we were denied. Well I don't have access to his records. All I know is he got a loan, and I didn't, but I had to prove that, and even as obviously as that was, it was difficult to prove, and a lot of farmers didn't get the $50,000 because they didn't prove discrimination. Some did, some didn't...Especially institutionalized racism; very difficult to prove because you got people in the system who are carrying out racist policies, and they don't even know it.2

In the process of interviewing farmers and activists, I was made uncomfortably aware that my conception of discrimination, in fact, was similar to that of the USDA. This conceptualization limits discrimination to discrete and identifiable acts of exploitation. In my operative understanding of discrimination, black farmers were limited by very specific historical enactments of prejudice. I shifted my focus to the historical development of industrial agriculture in an attempt to broaden my

---

conceptualization of racial injustice—diffuse and shifting, simultaneously social and material. In the process, I came to a realization that in positing industrial agriculture and black farmers as two discrete and separate realities, I was myself performing an injustice by assuming that there was a constant and unidirectional pressure on black farmers from industrial agriculture. That framework flattened a history of racial struggle while privileging the farm as an exceptional and idealized site. Black farmers, in that framing, were cast as ossified relics of an agrarian past, the final holdouts against a rising tide of industrial agriculture. This essentialization of the vanishing black farmer is quite pervasive. In the forward to a recent coffee table book on black farmers, for example, Juan Williams writes “Quickly! Take the photograph before that last light fades away for all time. Be careful as you take the pictures. What you capture with your eyes will have the last say on your memories.”

Abandoning this approach led me to one of the central arguments of this thesis. In the Delta, industrial agriculture is not an external and unidirectional force. Rather, the development of agro-industry was profoundly shaped by an opposition to black independence and power in agriculture. The hostility to black autonomy, the racial violence, and the fear of black agricultural power that characterized plantation production is sustained through the material and social characteristics of industrial agriculture in the present day. It is upon these developments that I focus with the hope of providing new

---

theoretical insight into the racial formation of agro-industry, and the desire to broad academic approaches to environmental justice and injustice.

III. Theoretical Influences

In thinking through the ways in which the politics of race and the environment are simultaneously enacted, political ecology holds a great deal of promise. Political ecology eschews the binaries of nature-culture, environment-society and human-nonhuman, enriching our understanding of the power inequalities that influence environmental change, and the political implications of social constructions of “the environment” and “nature”. The environment is not a realm that exists apart from or outside of social relations; it is neither an inert object to be possessed nor a wilderness to be tamed. More productively, it is a web of materialities embedded in social relations. Agricultural development in the Delta is thoroughly socioecological, from floods and levees to the genetics of cottonseeds and soybeans. This is, perhaps, an obvious statement. What I am interested in, however, are the ways in which both discursive constructions of the environment and the material effects of ecological interventions through agriculture are enrolled in the lived social and political-economic realities of race. Race as a social construct has very real material consequences, which mediate and are mediated by socioenvironmental relations. Race as “nature”—the presumption of identifiable biological basis for objective difference between groups of people—has been interwoven with the social constructions of non-human nature in the context of environmental
conflict. Thus the environment is central to the historical development of racial politics in the South, both in terms of the discursive constructions of human and non-human nature, and in the material manifestations of these conflicts. More pointedly; agro-industrial agriculture was developed as a tool of white supremacy, and reinforces social, political and environmental inequality in the present day.

Jake Kosek urges that we “take seriously the materiality of symbolic metaphors and the sociality of material facts.” This is part of Kosek’s project to rethink nature in a way that does not treat human difference as biological, while heeding the “consequential materiality of nature.” Kosek's work on the political ecology of forests and the formation of race in New Mexico shows that both nature and difference are enacted and contested through material practices, and are at once material and symbolic. Nature and difference, then, become entangled; they are not inherently or irreversibly linked.

Kosek's insight inspires my emphasis on the ways in which difference in the Delta is enacted and reinforced through the material practices of agriculture, and through which products and processes of agriculture have become signifiers of difference. In this way, for example, the cotton boll becomes a symbol of purity and of an idealized plantation past, even as the lived material practices of plantation agriculture were a space for the formation of this symbolism (see Chapters 2 & 3). In Understories, Kosek emphasizes the ways in which labor practices “form, reproduce, and contest the nature of the forest

---

5 Ibid., p. 23.
and the nature of difference.” Labor is the thread binding the material and the social, and is a site for the production of difference. This holds true in the Delta, where difference has been constructed and contested around the material practices of agriculture. In Delta agriculture theories of racial difference were mobilized to valorize planter control as socioenvironmental manipulations of plantation agriculture were advanced as a tautological justification for the plantation system (see Chapter 2).

Indeed, the constellation of whiteness that formed in the Delta was assembled in opposition to a purported wilderness to be tamed and black labor to be controlled and directed, as I detail in Chapters 2-4. For this reason, the shift in socionatural relations that agro-industrial development represented was also a profound shift in the symbolic and material practices of racial exploitation. This brings a new depth to the Marxist concept of the “metabolic rift”; when metabolism is interwoven with a brutal politics of racial exploitation, the “metabolic rift” is both a product of that exploitation and precipitates new articulations of the politics of identity. As I argue, the technologies and practices of agro-industry were formed through white supremacist notions of nature and identity, and through the material practices of racial exploitation. Thus, the “consequential materialities” (to borrow Kosek’s phrase) of agro-industry in the present day are shaped by the context in which it was developed. Most importantly, agro-industry in the Delta was shaped by a callous disregard (even contempt) for African Americans, and a preoccupation with subverting the environmental to the technological. These two related motivations are formative of the agro-industrial landscape of the

---

6 Ibid., p. 23.
present day, in which the intensification of environmental manipulation effects violence against black bodies as it undermines livelihoods.

Some recent environmental justice scholarship offers tremendous potential in working beyond these theoretical limitations, and is invaluable to my research for two reasons. First, environmental justice scholars have foregrounded the role of the state in managing racial identity and framing the problem of environmental injustice.7 Secondly, academia has lagged behind many activists in posing agriculture as an issue of environmental justice.8 This inattention to the impacts of agricultural production on bodies stands in sharp relief against the preoccupation with the health effects of pesticides and GMOs on affluent food consumers. I will explore the specific racial context in which pesticides were deployed in Mississippi agriculture to make the argument that the health effects of pesticides on food consumers were secondary to the violence against black agricultural labor through agricultural technologies. Attention to agriculture as a site for the contested production of inequality brings the interrelation of environmental justice and food justice into stark relief.9

Because I plan to broaden academic approaches of racial injustice in the South, the superb scholarship of Clyde Woods is indispensable. My interrogation of agro-

---

industry draws heavily upon Woods' political geography of the agrarian elite, and his commitment to a "blues epistemology". For Woods, it is insufficient to look at neoliberalism in the present day without understanding the profound role that a “neo-plantation epistemology” plays in shaping neoliberalism.\(^\text{10}\)

Woods has two crucial concerns that inform my approach. First, he shows how the political economy and white supremacist mobilizations of the plantation bloc in the United States South are not contained in absolute geographic space, and have powerful manifestations in the present day. This is part and parcel of his argument that neoliberalism is constituted by a neo-plantation epistemology. Ideology, representation and power in the South must be understood as both place-based and diffuse. The economic, political and social systems of plantation production are part of materiality and incorporated into representations in the present day—for example, when Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant invokes the productivity of industrial agriculture as a justification for its continued ownership by the white elite.\(^\text{11}\) The plantation is a means of social control, a space for white exploitation of black labor, and is sustained by a means of


\(^{11}\) Speaking to the Delta Council at their 2012 annual meeting, Bryant observed that “agriculture in the Delta accounts for $1.5 billion in annual income and employs more than 55,000 people…So when I hear people say that if we could only carve out the Delta and give it to someone else how great Mississippi would be…Ohhhhh…they shouldn’t say that around me.” Laws, F. “Governor Bryant: agriculture’s economic role often underrated.” *The Delta Farm Press* 14 May 2012.
classification that “has at its center the planter as the heroic master of a natural ethnic, class, gender, and environmental hierarchy.”

Woods was interested in the continuity and resilience of plantation relations, as well as the ways in which the plantation regime undergoes transformation and change. Thus, in Woods' work, the plantation is a site of material exploitation formed through social relations and conflict, and sustained by ideology and a means of representing the world. My concern for the means by which agro-industry and the “modernization” of agriculture are both constituted by and transform plantation relations are informed by this aspect of Woods' scholarship. Secondly, Woods stressed agency and active resistance to domination. Woods focuses on a means of political-economic explanation that is “centered upon resistance to plantation monopoly,” which he terms the “blues epistemology.” Woods refused to write of the plantation bloc in a way that grants it unassailable hegemony, and attempted to enlist academic writing into movements for political and social justice.

Woods' work wasn't simply a geographical theorization of racial politics; it stemmed from a dedication to mobilizations against plantation bloc exploitation, and a normative commitment to social justice. To this end, Woods found the disciplinary boundaries of academia counterproductive. Woods writes that "Existing disciplinary boundaries are still firmly arrayed against the advancement of comparative scholarship

---

14 Ibid., p. 5.
on knowledge systems, including the blues tradition. In this period of crisis," he urges, "rather than selecting one approach, we should encourage and study many epistemological innovations." I hope to answer Woods call to cut against the imperial force of disciplinary boundaries, and take seriously the "blues epistemology" as a method of scholarship. In this task I am indebted to Woods' own scholarship, and to the the insights of the farmers and activists I have interviewed. I intend for this thesis to be an early step in a long-term intellectual and personal commitment to social justice in the South. Otherwise, I will be leveraging injustice for academic gain and personal advancement, not unlike some organizations that capitalize upon the Delta's poverty as their raison d'être.

IV. Sources

I have used a wide variety of sources in the process of researching this thesis, most of which are archival. I have drawn upon United States Congressional hearings taking place between 1940 and 1975, most extensively for chapters 3-5. These hearings offer a extensive look at the debates surrounding agricultural politics, and provide insight on the translation of the Delta's racial politics of agriculture into national policy. To the best of my knowledge, these Congressional hearings have hardly been used by researchers. Woods, for example, relies upon secondary sources and other archival material, but leaves Congressional hearings largely untapped. They represent a rich and

---

extensive qualitative source, and provides the opportunity to examine the connections between racial formations and agricultural politics, and in particular, the discourses of white supremacist politics at the federal level.

The digital libraries of Mississippi State University, the University of Southern Mississippi, and the University of Mississippi have allowed me to access a variety of primary sources that would otherwise require a complete archival immersion—speeches by Cully A. Cobb (chapter 3) and Jamie Whitten (chapter 4), for example. The digital archives, however, represent a small fraction of the material available at the physical archives, and I eagerly anticipate the opportunity to dive into this bounty of historical sources. In particular, the Jamie L. Whitten Archive, which will soon be open at the University of Mississippi, will allow me to dramatically expand my research on Whitten's racial politics of the environment and agriculture. Because I have not yet visited the archive, this thesis' treatment of Whitten leans heavily on Congressional hearings.

In this thesis, I have also made use of books and pamphlets written by the Delta Council, Alfred Holt Stone, Jamie Whitten and the USDA in order to examine the ideological constructions of race and agriculture. I selected publications, spanning almost a century—but for the most part released between 1940 and 1970—that reflect agricultural discourses and influenced the politics and practice of agriculture. Finally, I have taken advantage of access to copies of the Mississippi Farm Research Bulletins—the monthly publication of research from the Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station—in order to further explore the institutional practice and material characteristics of agricultural research. I have focused on publications released between 1940 and 1970,
and gained access to these publications through the extensive Ohio State University Library System.

For the final chapter I have benefited from an unexpected archival source—the Civil Rights Movement Veterans website.\textsuperscript{16} Through this website, I have been able to access documents from groups active in the Mississippi Freedom Struggles in the 1960s and early 1970s. The digital archives of Mississippi universities have also provided some additional primary material from organizations active during the civil rights era. In addition to these sources, the a collection of speeches by Fannie Lou Hamer, \textit{To Tell it Like it Is}, has proven tremendously valuable.\textsuperscript{17} This patchwork of sources leaves a great deal to be desired, of course, but provides me with an excellent starting point for PhD-level research. Of course, as I mentioned in section two of this chapter, the most invaluable sources—the farmers and activists I interviewed—remain the least visible in this thesis. I intend to expand upon this research in the coming years, and hope to provide research that is also useful to them.

\textit{V. Thesis Structure}

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The second chapter is the first of four that are focused upon the historical development of agro-industry. In chapter 2, I begin this project by specifically examining the racial ideologies of Delta planter Alfred Holt Stone and Massachusetts demographer Walter F. Willcox. By examining the writing of Stone

\textsuperscript{16}Civil Rights Movement Veteran Website. Accessible online at: \url{http://www.crmvet.org}. Accessed April 15, 2013.

and Willcox, and particularly their collaborative *Studies in the American Race Problem*, I intend to draw attention to the theories and strategies that are often implicit in subsequent development of industrial agriculture. Attention to Stone is necessary because he helped shape the early development of industrial agriculture, while providing a lens to examine the formation of ideologies of race in that process. In particular, I focus on Stone and Willcox's theory of “racial competition,” which simultaneously takes inequality and resistance as signs of black inferiority while providing a blueprint for subsequent racial exploitation in agriculture. I use *Studies in the American Race Problem* to show how central plantation racial ideology and power was in the development and deployment of agricultural technology.

In the third chapter, “Stoneville and the Agricultural Research State”, I provide a brief history of agricultural research, federal involvement, and the development of industrial agriculture in the Delta. The argument that federal involvement in programs like the New Deal served the interests of the plantation elite in the Delta is not entirely novel, but it is necessary to flesh out this formative period in the development of industrial agriculture. I intend to trouble any idea that the development of industrial agriculture was inevitable, and I highlight the opportunities for a more just and equal agrarian landscape that were actively opposed by the white elite. In this chapter, I also focus on the politics and representations of cotton plantation agriculture, which played an important role in the development of the particular form of agro-industry that saturates the Delta in the present day. This chapter ends with a review of how the militarization of
agriculture during the 1940s and 1950s strengthened the bonds between the agro-
industrializing Delta plantation elite and the USDA.

In the fourth chapter, I narrow my attention to the ideological and political career
of Mississippi Congressman Jamie L. Whitten. As with Alfred H. Stone, Whitten shaped
the formation of industrial agriculture, and his writings provide insight into the racial
ideologies that animate agro-industrial development. Scholars in recent years have payed
more attention to segregationist politicians like James O. Eastland and John Stennis than
they have to Jamie Whitten. In Joseph Crespino's text *In Search of Another Country:
Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, for example, Whitten only appears a
few times, in contrast with the dozens of appearances by Eastland and Stennis. This
relative neglect of Whitten, I believe, stems from a narrow conception of the political that
ignores the central role of the material politics of agriculture in southern white
supremacy.

In the process, a crucial opportunity to examine the development of agro-industry
as a material racial politics has been neglected. Whitten held tremendous power as the
Chair of the U.S. House Subcommittee for Agricultural Appropriations, and used that
power to pursue elite interests in agro-industry. Once dubbed the “Permanent Secretary
of Agriculture” due to his three-decade reign as Chair, Jamie Whitten shaped not only
agriculture in Mississippi, but federal agricultural policy. His 1965 book *That We May
Live*, moreover, established him as a shameless apologist for pesticides. I read Whitten's

---

book against the racial politics of Mississippi agriculture to argue that the chemical intensification of Delta agriculture was a crucial tool of white supremacy. Using Whitten's career as a lens, I show that the violence of industrial agriculture against bodies and to livelihoods was developed around a politics of threat. Whitten took advantage of the national trend toward the regimentation and militarization of agriculture in order to pursue a material racial politics that shapes opportunities in the Delta in the present day. In the process, Whitten shaped the modern USDA towards racial injustice and exploitation. Through a focus on Whitten, I highlight the longstanding complicity of the USDA with white supremacy in southern agriculture. By focusing on Whitten's politics of environmental injustice, I contribute to the theorization of agriculture as a question of environmental justice.

In the fifth chapter, I shift my focus to the black freedom struggles in the Delta of the 1960s and beyond. With a particular focus on the activism of Fannie Lou Hamer, a courageously vocal leader of the movement for freedom in the Delta, I highlight the importance of agricultural activism during the freedom struggles in the Delta. A limited conception of the civil rights era serves to sever civil rights and Black Power, but for activists like Fannie Lou Hamer and groups such as the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, the two were intertwined. Activist contested the concentrated landownership, the exploitation of labor, the production of hunger and poverty, and political control and segregation. With this in mind, I argue that inequality is not “persistent”. Rather, it is reproduced through the continuation of the exploitative historical processes of agro-industrial development.
VI. Conclusion

There has been no shortage of studies, many well-intentioned, that are funded because they examine aspects of black poverty in the Mississippi Delta. If black Deltans living in poverty were able to capitalize on the studies conducted about them, racial inequality would have long-ago disappeared in Mississippi. Similarly it is well known and exhaustively documented that black farmers have faced pervasive discrimination from the state, but as Eddie Carthan stresses, the Pigford v. Glickman decisions, which compelled the USDA to compensate black farmers for discrimination, didn't even provide enough money to buy a modern tractor.\footnote{Interview with Eddie Carthan.} Without attention to the politicized processes of racial formation and the dynamic production of injustice, inequality can be acknowledged (and even stressed) while simultaneously obscuring the reproduction of injustice in the present day.

My research draws upon interviews, archival research, histories of agrarian change and the civil rights era, and textual interpretation. I combine aspects of political ecology, critical race theory, and rural sociology in attempt to present a new approach to academic studies of agriculture and race in the United States South. Rather than chart the decline of black farming and landownership over the past century, I hope to present a

convincing argument that inequalities in agriculture are *not* the inevitable result of the “modernization” of agriculture or the unstoppable force of white supremacy. There have always been diverse forms of resistance to white supremacy in the Delta, which inform the field of possibilities in the present day. Just as important, however, is the perpetuation of inequality through the technology, ecology and social relations of agriculture.

Agriculture in the Delta, then, is still a contested terrain; overdetermined by racial formations, ideologies, circuits of capital, landownership, technologies of agro-industrial production, and the institutions of the USDA. White supremacy in agriculture is a diffuse and shifting ideology, and is certainly not limited to explicit discrimination based upon race. As farmers and agricultural activists show, however, white supremacy continues to be challenged through practice.

An impressive and growing body of scholarship is concerned with the history and current practices of black farming and farmownership. While I am indebted to this work, I cannot add much to this research with my thesis. Though I interviewed black farmers and activists, I do not intend to describe black farming practices. It is with some degree of shame that I admit that this thesis cannot do justice to the farmers with whom I spoke, and will likely be of little use to them. I encountered a remarkable degree of heterogeneity in the backgrounds and practices of black farmers; a diversity that resists description. Rather, I look to the farmers I interviewed for their perspectives on agriculture in the Delta. I am also interested in the alternative visions they foster for a more equitable agri-food system and a more liveable Delta. The continuation of black farming and landholding is of crucial importance, and the persistence of black farmers in
spite of pervasive discrimination is astounding. These are preconditions for my theoretical claims as I focus on Delta agriculture as a field in which inequality is both (re)produced and challenged.
Chapter 2: Alfred Holt Stone and “Racial Competition” as a Strategy

I. Introduction

The Jamie Whitten Delta States Research Center is a grandiose building for a village as small as Stoneville. Located approximately 10 miles east of the Mississippi River, the building is at the center of a bustling nexus of agricultural research and development. Though the village is small, it serves as a research hub for industrial agriculture in the “Delta States” of Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas. The Delta Council is located at the Stoneville, and what location could make a more ideal headquarters for a group with such a vested influence in agricultural development? Stoneville is a concentration of public research and private capital, with a particular emphasis on research in cotton, rice, soybeans and catfish. The research complex has been a hub for agricultural science since 1905, when it was founded by a group of planters led by Alfred Holt Stone.21 Even as Stone provided the capital for the nascent Delta research station, he shaped the material and ideological development of agro-

industry in the Delta. In Stone's publications, he often used his own plantation—nearby Dunleith—as an empirical reinforcement of his truth claims of racial difference in agriculture. Perhaps he hoped that Stoneville would serve a similar purpose. Regardless, Stoneville has persisted and changed even as Stone's texts have largely been forgotten.

I have chosen to focus on Alfred Holt Stone because his self-styled role as a racial scientist and his numerous writings on “the race problem” provide insight into the white supremacist underpinnings of agricultural research and development in Mississippi. As I was researching this thesis, Stone's name reappeared time and time again—he played a role in the creation of the Stoneville research station, he helped shape the USDA cotton acreage reduction program in the 1930s, he was an early member of the Delta Council, and he positioned himself as an intellectual champion of “State Sovereignty.” What I at first thought would be a brief look at Stone's voluminous writings on “the Negro” and “the race problem” turned into a very productive venture, as it helped me make sense of the racial epistemologies surrounding the development of industrial agriculture in the subsequent century. Stone's purported expertise on race reveals little about “the Negro in the Mississippi Delta,” but his frantic obsession with racial classification in agriculture provides a glimpse of the white supremacist ideologies underpinning agricultural research and development. Stone's writings are animated by the white fear of black autonomy, and the multiple violences underpinnings the plantation project become evident in his work.

Perhaps it goes without saying that this capital was entirely the product of black labor and the exploitation of the land through plantation agriculture. I am tempted to use the term “plantationist” rather than “planter”—which implies some sort of productive labor.
Stone was himself an enthusiastic supporter of “scientific agriculture”, and it is hardly surprising that he would take an interest in establishing a center for agricultural research. What merits attention, however, are the racial ideologies he enthusiastically propagated. Stone’s writings don’t merely offer a glimpse of Delta plantation ideology; they were widely read among the plantation elite, and were influential far beyond the Delta. Stone’s writings on race and agriculture provide an insight into the racial ideologies underpinning early agricultural research in the South. What Alfred Holt Stone outlined, I argue, was not only an ideology of white supremacy; it was a strategic approach to the development of inequality through agriculture.\textsuperscript{23} Stone’s writings faded from public view as his brand of explicitly-racist plantation paternalism became unpopular, but many of the ideologies interlaced in his texts are alive in the racial politics and practice of agricultural research and development. I will focus on several political ideologies that Stone presented as empirical observations of race and agriculture in the South. These comprise components of the implicit theory governing the plantation bloc's strategies of agricultural development throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Moreover, in his collaboration with Massachusetts demographer Walter F. Willcox, there is a foreshadowing of the ideological harmony of the agri-political alliance between Southern

\textsuperscript{23} Once again, the depth and breadth of Clyde Woods' scholarship is astounding. Woods devoted several pages to the writing and racial philosophies of Stone, focusing on the heated debate between Stone and W.E.B. Du Bois. Woods highlighted Stone's theory of “racial friction”, whereas I am more interested on the importance of Stone and Willcox's theory of racial competition as it has played out in the development of industrial agriculture. Woods anticipated my key argument, though, with his concluding observation on Stone; “His works have always been venerated at the center of plantation bloc thought: the planter-led organizations and research institutions located at the USDA's Delta Branch Experiment Station in Stoneville, Mississippi (Woods 1998, 100).”
segregationists and national policy, which will be developed in greater detail in chapters three and four.

As I will show, the emphasis that Stone and Willcox place on “industry” and productivity in agriculture serve to depoliticize racial inequality, concealing the way in which white domination and ownership serve to produce that inequality. Their emphasis on “racial competition” as the definitive characteristic of postbellum agriculture further naturalizes the production of inequality, while outlining a strategy for the continued reproduction of that inequality. Impossible though it may be to gauge the precise influence of Stone and Willcox’s book *Studies in the American Race Problem*, it allows us to understand the function of agro-industry as a material strategy for racial differentiation and control. It is safe to say that Stone both reflected and shaped the racial ideologies of Delta planters on the cusp of mechanization.

II. Racial Difference as Agricultural Practice

Stone asserted, however inconsistently, that the development of southern agriculture was only incidentally dependent upon black labor. “Whatever the opinion of those most closely in contact with Negro labor”, wrote Stone, “it is none the less a fact that white labor can accommodate itself to any work which can be performed by the Negro, whether it be the draining of Mississippi lowlands in 1860, or the digging of the Panama Canal a half century later.”

---

the Delta was a place destined to begin with the production of commodity crops, and that black labor was merely secondary to this environmental fact. In this way, Stone subverted the constitutive role of labor to the essential qualities of the regional environment and of cotton.

Moreover, Stone argued, the planter, rather than the slave, had been the victim of the plantation system:

There is no more pathetically untrue picture in fiction than that of the 'typical antebellum southern planter,' rolling in wealth and living a life of luxurious idleness. As a class, they were the pioneer captains of industry in America, and, in the main, they worked hard, lived on credit and died in debt.25

In contrast with his image of the industrious planter whipped by the vicissitudes of the market and held in bondage by creditors, Stone depicts black southerners as the victims of abolition, since “The best test of success in 'making money out of Negroes' ceased to be the capacity to keep down sickness among them, to feed and clothe them properly, to keep them contented though not free, to work them to the best advantage, having always in view the fact that life was the only limit to their tenure of service.”26

In Stone's mind, the early 20th century was a critical juncture that would define the future of southern agriculture, and at the center of this question was black agriculture:

The Negro furnishes the connecting link between the past and present of southern agriculture, and he is to play an important part for either good or evil in its future. Had the foundation stone of antebellum southern agriculture been white labor, instead of Negro, the increase of cultivated acreage would have been slower, and the production correspondingly less, but the process of growth would have been sound at the core.27

25 Ibid., p. 12.
26 Ibid., p. 13.
27 Ibid., p. 13.
Stone pays homage to the memory of the antebellum plantation, in which “a high order of intelligence was required to handle successfully a plantation on a large scale,” but what is the role that Stone sees blacks playing in southern agriculture? Stone offers a typology of agricultural structures—plantation agriculture, tenant farmers, and independent landowners. For Stone, the question was “one of speculating upon the length of time the plantation system, based upon Negro labor, can be maintained.”

Remember that Stone was unwilling to admit the value of black labor within the plantation system. Rather, he held that “where another furnishes the capital, the brains, and the direction, the part played by labor is no more than that of a tool or a machine.” However, there was one possible threat to the plantation system—black landowners:

The only active, positive part possible for the Negro must be either as an independent renter, gradually emerging into the landowning class, or as a landowner himself. It is only here that his economic status is really higher than that of a day laborer; only here that he has either initiative or control; only here that he becomes an independent economic force. The Negro has it in his own hands to play either an active or a passive part in the upbuilding of the section in which he lives, which is still primarily an agricultural region.

At this point, it is important to stress that Stone is positioning himself as a disinterested observer, and agriculture as an endless terrain of possibility in which failure to enter the ranks of landowners is attributable to racial deficiency. Stone viewed—or cynically promoted—agriculture as the sphere in which racial worth and difference could be

28 Ibid., p. 13.
29 Ibid., p. 13.
32 Ibid., p. 15.
observed. Concealed in Stone's purportedly objective prose is the very real threat that Stone sees in the form of black success in agriculture. It was a threat not only to his theories of racial difference, but to the very plantation system upon which his power and financial success depended. Stone was unwilling to admit the concerted effort to thwart any black success in agriculture or landownership—an effort that he was himself very much a part. Though Stone endeavors to gloss over the injustices of southern agriculture, his own active role in reproducing inequality is glaringly obvious, permeating his writings.

In *Studies in the American Race Problem*, Stone relates his own “plantation experiment”, in which he attempts to make a contribution to the understanding of “the business relations between the plantation management and its Negro labour”.\(^{33}\) Exhibiting his astoundingly inversion of the political economy of southern agriculture, Stone writes of the tremendous benefits blacks in the Delta receive from planter competition for their labor, which provides black laborers with “opportunities for driving bargains superior to those possessed by any other class of agriculturalists with which I have had any acquaintance.”\(^{34}\) Stone commences to paint the most absurdly idyllic picture of sharecropping—“partnership with the planter”—before introducing the experiment.\(^{35}\) Stone was interested in finding the best way to maintain an “assured tenantry”—to check the mobility of tenants. To this end, Stone's experiment entailed providing better conditions for tenant families (“nothing philanthropic...a business

\(^{34}\) Ibid., pp. 125-126.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 126,
proposition, pure and simple") in the hopes of securing their loyalty: “The plan was to select a number of Negro families, offer them the best terms and most advantageous tenant relations, and so handle them and their affairs as to make them reach a condition approaching as nearly as possible that of independence.” Stone's experiment consisted of allowing tenants to purchase their own tools and rent the land rather than sharecropping. In Stone's estimation, the results were disastrous because tenants were in the nasty habit of leaving Dunleith Plantation once they had improved their financial situation:

We demonstrated our ability to make independent property-owning families out of poverty-stricken material. These families in turn demonstrated the fact of their independence by severing relations with us almost as promptly as we put them on their feet. After the termination of three years we had begun to feel reasonably certain that even the most practical appeal we could make to radically improved material welfare would be generally overcome by an apparently instinctive desire to "move." After the experience of five years we were quite satisfied of our entire incapacity to make the average plantation Negro realise the remotest causal relation between stability and prosperity.

Stone makes it clear that independence is only acceptable when it is not, in fact, independence at all. Out of this hostility toward black independence, and the belief that "an absolute monopoly" on labor held by blacks in the South constituted "an apparently impregnable economic position," Stone advanced his views on racial inequality. In their theory of "racial competition", however, Stone and Massachusetts demographer

36 Ibid., p. 127.
37 Ibid., p. 127.
38 Ibid., pp. 130-131
Walter F. Willcox fashioned a 20th century manifesto and strategic plan for continued white supremacy in agriculture. It is to these “observations” that I will now turn my attention.

Stone praised the plantation and rigid segregation as the very conditions for black opportunity in the South. “There is but one area of any size”, Stone wrote, “in the world wherein his race may obey the command to eat its bread in the sweat of its face, side by side with the white man.” However, Stone presented white competition as a specter haunting black opportunities in a utopian South—“the slow but steady encroachment of Northern white men and foreigners upon the negro's ancient Southern stronghold.”40 As usual, Stone focuses his attention on agriculture as the proving ground of racial difference, ridiculing Frederic Douglass' assertion that the southern elite depended upon black agricultural labor for their very existence. “It has been the curse of the South for a hundred years”, Stone wails, “that her people have clung tenaciously and stubbornly to a conviction, never reasonable or well founded, that negro labor was essential to the cultivation of her soil.”41 Stone draws the battle lines:

We are now merely at the insignificant beginning of a movement of the years, the very opening of a struggle between white and black in which there will be no element of sentiment, where sympathy will have no place, where the Negro will be called upon to prove his right to live, or accept the consequences of failure—where “success” will be “equality's” one and only test. The contest will not be in the slums and alleys of the city. *It will be fought out in the open field,* under the sun and upon the soil—where the world may look on [emphasis added].42

40 Ibid., p. 250  
41 Ibid., p. 265  
42 Ibid., p. 266
Stone spends the remainder of his paper comparing black-operated farms and Italian-operated farms, concluding that Italian farmers are more efficient, intelligent, and productive. Stone's obsession with impugning black agricultural practice extends even to the garden—"the most broadly characteristic feature of Negro agriculture is to be found in the almost universally neglected garden. Nowhere else is the contrast presented more strongly by the Italian."\textsuperscript{43} Stone's tremendous hostility toward black agriculture isn't vaguely hidden beneath his purported interest in observation, and no wonder—the plantation construction of whiteness was dependent upon the ability to construct black farmers as inferior, and to redefine the black assertions of independence through mobility as "shiftlessness and improvidence."\textsuperscript{44} So consuming is Stone's investment in his perception of black inferiority that he falls over himself with eagerness to praise Italian farmers:

> From the garden spot which the negro allows to grow up in weeds, time Italian will supply his family from early spring until late fall, and also market enough largely to carry him through all the winter. I have seen the ceilings of their houses literally covered with strings of dried butter beans, pepper, okra, and other garden products, while the walls would be hung with corn, sun-cured in the roasting ear stage.\textsuperscript{45}

Stone's investment in proving difference-as-inferiority in agriculture is rooted in a political, economic, and racial investment in plantation agriculture. He goes so far as to attempt to racialize the presence of weeds, which he believes are confirmation of the superiority of Italian agricultural practices in conforming to white agricultural norms.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 283
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 280
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 284
His preoccupation with “the factor of white competition” is evidence of the tremendous threat that any exhibition of black independence through agriculture posed to plantation owners. At the same time, he is implicitly articulating the importance of competition in sustaining his paranoid racial order:

This life of ours is, and is likely always to remain, a ceaseless struggle for supremacy among nations, and races, and individuals. Heretofore he has been largely shielded by conditions, partly economic and partly geographic, but it would be unwise for the Negro to cherish the delusion that he alone of all mankind is to remain forever exempt from such a contest. Nothing is more surely written in the book of fate than that he will have to meet it, soon or late.46

Agricultural development in the Delta was informed by this racial philosophy of competition as both effect and instrument of white superiority. Stone advances competition as the evidence of white superiority, while in reality it was being employed as a shifting strategy of white domination and black exclusion from agriculture. Further evidence that this strategy was a guiding philosophy of agro-industrial development in Mississippi can be found in the essays of Stone's collaborator Walter F. Willcox, which Stone found fit to include in his book The American Race Problem, published in 1908.

III. Racial Competition

Willcox wrote that “Southern agriculture is becoming increasingly diversified, and is demanding and receiving a constantly increasing amount of industry, energy and intelligence—characteristics which the whites more generally possess or more readily

46 Ibid., pp. 287-288.
Willcox pointed to recent elements of mechanization in southern agriculture, arguing that “every improvement in agriculture or industry anywhere tending to lower the price of a staple product is a spur to former producers. They must meet the situation by economies of production or economies of consumption, by improving their own methods or by living on a smaller return.” In the light of technological changes in agriculture, Willcox argued that any “absolute” progress of blacks since emancipation was irrelevant because “the test which the race has to face is the test of relative efficiency.” Thus, due to advances in agricultural technology, “the strenuous and increasing industrial competition between the two races often results in local displacement of coloured labor. The Negro cotton grower, unable to live on the decreasing return from his land, gives place to another tenant, white or black, and the former family drifts away.”

Any use of technology is presented as evidence of white superiority, and underlying it all is Stone and Willcox's obsession with “racial competition.” In the essay “The Probable Increase of the Negro Race in the United States”, Willcox returns to the question of new agricultural technology in the South. At every turn, Willcox sees evidence that “the Negro race in the South, in its competition with the whites”, is losing ground. The increase in cotton manufacturing in the South represents an “invasion of the Negroes' home”, but offers little opportunity for employment. To the extent that

48 Ibid., p. 456.
49 Ibid., p. 456.
50 Ibid., p. 458.
51 Ibid., p. 523.
blacks benefit, Willcox asserts, “it is only the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table.” He points to changes in rice production in Louisiana as proof that whites are more capable of “agriculture by improved methods”, and that these improvements bring prosperity to whites, while contributing to a decline in the black population. Finally, Willcox points to the advance of the boll weevil as the harbinger of further white competitive advantage in southern agriculture:

Energy, ingenuity, and perseverance in surmounting new difficulties are far more characteristic of whites than of Negroes. It is well known that a large part of the field work in the cultivation of cotton is done by whites. It seems probable that, when the boll weevil reaches the cotton growing district of the lower Mississippi, as it is almost certain to do in the next ten years, and finds a region where practically all the cotton growing is done by Negro labour, it will bear more hardly upon the yield in that district than it has borne upon the yield in Texas, and that the new pest will contribute in some measure either to decrease the importance of that area as a cotton centre or else to decrease the dominance of Negro labour in the cotton fields there.

To Stone and Willcox, if black farmers lost their land, it was because of individual shortcomings predicted by racial disposition. To the extent that "the decreasing return from his land" is related to productivity gains through agricultural research and development, Stone was at once propagating a racial philosophy of white supremacy through his prominence as an intellectual, and engineering the evidence of this very supremacy through his support of agricultural “modernization.” What Stone and Willcox brushed aside, of course, was the dramatically uneven access to yield-increasing technology. Instead, they use competition as evidence of innate black inferiority.

---

53 Ibid., p. 524.
54 Ibid., p. 525.
55 Ibid., pp. 526-527.
Technological changes are identified as functions of race, rather than moments of racial formation within supremely unequal material and discursive context of white supremacy. They employ a double meaning of industry in agriculture. On one hand, industry is the willingness and commitment to work. Formed in opposition with black “shiftlessness and improvidence”, this definition revolves around the normalized of white agricultural ideals. On the other hand, industry is defined by intelligence and the mastery of technological developments in agriculture. They present agriculture as a neutral arbiter of racial competition, and redefine power inequalities as inherent racial difference.

IV. Conclusion

Stone and Willcox foreshadow the alliance between nationalist productivism and southern white supremacy in the development of agro-industry. At the heart of the Studies in the American Race Problem is the articulation of the multiple white supremacies of American agri-politics: an emphasis on production and efficiency in spite of—or because of—the human cost, and the justification of white supremacy through the inequalities produced by the unequal relations of agriculture. The ways in which Stone and Willcox establish their authority in Studies in the American Race Problem indicate that the prominent position of the Delta elite in shaping national agricultural discourse and politics (I'll explore this in depth in the coming chapters) was being established in the early years of the twentieth century. Stone asserts that as a planter and a southerner, he possesses an intimate expertise in “the racial problem.” Willcox, on the other hand, is presented as an unimpeachable source because he is from Massachusetts, and therefore
cannot be biased. Their work depends upon the claim that power is beneficent, the concomitant denial of meaningful agency on the part of blacks, and the use of inequality to justify the very power that produces it. This is the circuit of power-ideology is maintained by the very agro-industrial technology that Stone provided capital to develop through Stoneville.

It is important to keep in mind the threat that black farming and landownership represented—and continue to represent—to white political and economic control in the Delta. Stone and Willcox's theory of white competitive advantage is rendered ludicrous when it is put in the context of the long war on black farmers and landowners that began after reconstruction. In this light, there is no “persistent inequality” in the present day Delta—rather, inequality is the reproduction of injustice through the material and racial economy of agriculture. Stone and Willcox's ideologies of white superiority were absolutely dependent upon the denial of the role of economic power, violence and coercion in maintaining the plantation system, the denial of the centrality of labor to agriculture, and the refusal to accept the capacities of black farmers. The emphasis that Stone and Willcox place on white ingenuity and “industry” in agricultural practice is particularly absurd considering the profound historical role that blacks have played in shaping American agricultural practice. As Judith Carney has extensively documented, for example, rice production in North America relied extensively upon the ingenuity of African production practices introduced by slaves.56 From the very establishment of

plantation agriculture, Stone and Willcox's supposed white ingenuity in “improved agriculture” was often nothing more than theft. Ignoring power relations, however, Stone and Willcox treat inequalities in the ownership of agriculture and land as proof of white superiority.

In the chapters that follow, I will show how central agro-industrial development became to the plantation elite's increasingly-frantic efforts to maintain control of the Delta. Agro-industrial development did not consist of neutral technologies that were external to racial conflict in the Delta. Rather, they were thoroughly enmeshed in conflicts over land, labor, and the future of agriculture. Their effects, moreover, were far from neutral. I have devoted so much attention to Stone and Willcox in this chapter because they provide a means of examining the formation of whiteness around discourses of agricultural productivity. Through the agricultural research state—the subject of the next chapter—this productivity would be pursued through scientific research and development. But as the logic of scientific agriculture took form, plantation productivity was dependent upon control of and violence against black labor. We need only look to Stone's own writing for evidence of this. Stone held that racial violence was the inevitable and justified expression of “race friction” when the “harmonious” interaction between the races was disturbed. The Delta, to Stone, epitomized this “harmony”—a harmony that Stone argued was maintained by absolute control over labor and the institutions of the state. Therefore, control of the black population was justified as a means to prevent violence, and violence was held as the legitimate expression of “racial friction” when the balance of control shifted.
Chapter 3: Stoneville and the Agricultural Research State

The ability of U.S. Farmers to produce the bountiful supplies of essential foods, fiber, and agricultural raw materials that contribute so much to our high standard of living, making U.S. Agriculture the envy of the world, didn't happen by chance. It is the product of the unique Federal-State relationship in the field of agricultural research and education.

-B.F. Smith, Executive Vice President of the Delta Council, 1975

Either you change with the system, or you don't. Because the guy next door, he's gonna plant Roundup Cotton. Not that he mean to hurt you, it's just that you're in the middle, so either you join it or you don't. Now I got out of cotton because I guess I wasn't able to put all what you need to put in to keep it going...

-Curtis Williams (pseudonym), 2012.

I. Introduction

Alfred Holt Stone dedicated Studies in the American Race Problem to his “father and mother, connecting links to the Old Régime” of the antebellum plantation. In this thesis, I use Stoneville as a site for the exploration of how Stone's own regime was

---


58 I am using a pseudonym because “Curtis” didn't want to be identified. Curtis was understandably concerned about potential economic or institutional retaliation, since he discussed the extensive discrimination he had faced in the past. Curtis owns a small farm of roughly 100 acres, and his farming history illustrates the interwoven nature of explicit discrimination—through the denial of loans and assistance—and the material characteristics of agricultural technology designed and adopted in the context of dispossession. The price of Roundup Ready (glyphosate resistant) soy and cotton seeds has risen significantly in recent years, but black farmers have been historically (and often still are) shut off from access to capital necessary to adopt this increasingly-expensive technology. Glyphosate is a potent herbicide, and it can easily kill soybeans or cotton if they don't have the genetically engineered trait of glyphosate resistance. That is to say, if the adjacent farmer is “Roundup Ready”, you had better be as well.
transformed into the agro-industrial land/power regime of the present day. The Agricultural Experiment Station at Stoneville, as you may recall, was established in 1904 through the efforts of a group of planters led by Stone. I begin this chapter with the two preceding quotes because they quickly arrive at the core of my argument. I certainly agree with B.F. Smith that agro-industrial development and yield increases “didn't happen by chance.” I take his statement several steps further, though, to argue that agricultural research and development were developed and deployed as racial tools for the political manipulation of the environment in the Delta. Specifically, agricultural research was pursued in the context of a desire to reduce the reliance upon black labor, and served to select which farmers would be successful. Throughout this process, however, the Delta's elite were absolutely dependent upon black labor, and preoccupied with creating and reinforcing racial boundaries. Agricultural research and development served as an enactment of Stone and Willcox's theory of “racial competition”, enforcing the boundaries of race and place in the pursuit of white control and profit. The technologies of agro-industry, then, weren't merely tools used by racist plantation owners—they were racial technologies, and their development fundamentally shapes opportunities in the Delta of the present day, including Mr. Williams' farming practices.

Two recent southern agricultural histories help situate the development of agricultural technology in the context of power and racial politics. In *Boll Weevil Blues*, published in 2011, James Giesen revisits the advance of the boll weevil in the cotton plantation South, showing that discourses about the boll weevil intersected with the
impacts of the boll weevil in the context of racialized political and economic power.\textsuperscript{59} Giesen's attention to the ways in which power-laden constructions of non-human nature and race influenced the deployment of agricultural science to fight the boll weevil inform my own theoretical questions. Similarly, George Ellenberg's \textit{Mule South to Tractor South} (2007) focuses on the economic, ideological and technical aspects of the mechanization of southern agriculture.\textsuperscript{60} Ellenberg provides a window into the political economy of research and development in southern agriculture. For example, Ellenberg examines the ways in which mules were deployed in the symbolic constructions of race, as well as their material and economic importance as a structuring technology of race relations in agriculture. Read together, these two texts help me compose my argument that the industrialization of agriculture was not purely an external force that set the stage for the transformation of race dynamics in the Delta, but rather a set of environmental practices and technologies that were profoundly social and embedded in place.

The remainder of this thesis will focus both on how: a) the development of agro-industry in the Delta has been depicted, and b) how it has been deployed as a political, economic and environmental tool for racial differentiation and control. This focus is motivated by a major disjuncture between the representations and the material effects of agro-industrial development, a disjuncture which is not entirely accidental. It was far easier to justify research on a “mechanical device for killing weeds and grasses” as a means of ensuring that “cotton can successfully compete with synthetic fibers” than it


was to admit that planters begrudged the small fraction of their profits that went to pay those who worked in the cotton fields, and were frightened by the independence of laborers who pursued less exploitative ways of making a living.\textsuperscript{61} Similarly, the assertion that “one of the causes of low farm income is low yields” obscures the ways in which high yields could co-exist—even be productive of—low farm incomes.\textsuperscript{62} Stoneville, Mississippi, USA is at once a synecdoche of agricultural research and development in Mississippi and a very real center of power in regional and national agriculture.

The village of Stoneville was established in the mid-eighteenth century and named after David L. Stone, the great-uncle of Alfred Holt Stone.\textsuperscript{63} The land for what became, in 1904, the Delta Branch Experiment Station was acquired by a group of planters led by Alfred Holt Stone. Stone's interest in research was certainly active at the time, as he was in the midst of his “experiment” at Dunleith Plantation—adjacent to the experiment station. Nevertheless, Stone was presumably far too preoccupied with championing virtues of white male dominion of the Delta to run the menial affairs of the station, and H. E. Savely was named as the first superintendent.\textsuperscript{64}

The clustering of agricultural power represented by Dunleith Plantation and the Delta Branch Experiment Station has changed without dispersing—today, Stoneville is the site of the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Jamie Whitten Research Center, the Delta Health Alliance, Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management


\textsuperscript{63} Bowman, D. H., & Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station. (1986)., pp. 1-2.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 3.
(Delta F.A.R.M.), and the Delta Council. Rather than slogging through a superintendent-by-superintendent history of the station from 1904 until the present day, I will focus on a few key moments in the history of agricultural research around Stoneville. Stoneville—representing agricultural research and development—was a central site for the harmonization of elite interests in the Delta. I have thus far presented the Delta's white agricultural elite as uniform, but it was indeed differentiated, and the potential for contradictions were great. Whiteness was largely policed through the brutal moral and political economy of plantation agriculture, which was composed of a constellation of white interest, including gins, banks, plantation owners, farm implement dealers and merchants.65 They were united in an alliance of whiteness—as a conviction of superiority and as a means of political and economic gain. The argument that the well-being of the Delta rose and fell with the welfare of the cotton plantation had an element of truth to it, but only if “the Delta” was defined as white through the exclusion of blacks in the Delta. Nevertheless, the alliance of whiteness smoothed the potential contradictions of the cotton economy, providing the means by which a rising tide could indeed float all white ships. Stoneville, though, was formed in relation to divergent groups within the white

---


Cobb makes the important point that much of the clearing of Delta land and the rapid expansion of the cotton plantation economy occurred in the early decades of the 20th century, rather than before the Civil War. The “frontier” nature of the Delta in the early 20th century speaks to the significance of Stone's writing in the formation of plantation racial identities in the Delta. In the Delta, new constructions of race—drawing on available discourses and articulated around the material politics of cotton production—were necessary to bolster plantation control. Cobb and Willis, however, both seem to take race as a given. Their engagement with racial formation is consequently limited, though their rich empirical detail provides ample material for examining the formation and policing of race in this crucial period.
elite. In this thesis, I will make an analytical distinction between those who provided inputs—such as seed and chemicals—and plantation owners. The potential contradiction is evident: those who provided the off-farm inputs for plantation owners served to profit from the costs of production on the plantation. Stoneville served both of these factions who were, of course, in alliance against any manifestation of black independence.

II. Cottonphilia and the Boll Weevil

The early years of Stoneville were shaped by a rising planter paranoia about the uneven eastward advance of the boll weevil. As James Giesen has recently documented, USDA researchers—including those at Stoneville—initially urged diversification as a response to the boll weevil's spread through the cotton regions of the South. Planter interests in the Delta, spearheaded by the Greenwood Business League—a coalition of planters and bankers in the Leflore County, on the eastern edge of the Delta—coordinated to shape the narrative about the boll weevil's spread and limit access to research about dealing with the boll weevil infestation.66 Plantation elites were vitally concerned with maintaining their position as the beneficiaries, directors and distributors of scientific research. In Pete Daniel's 1985 account, early USDA research and extension work in the South was well-intentioned, but “helped the more educated and aggressive farmers to survive, while those who were marginal gradually disappeared from the land.”67 What Daniel fails to adequately represent, however, is the USDA's tight alliance with regional

circuits of exploitation and profit. The mutualism between state-funded agricultural research and the Delta's white elite is certainly a force shaping the trajectory of agriculture in the Mississippi Delta, and plantationist control over agricultural research and extension in the Delta was firmly established as the boll weevil advanced.

You may have, perhaps, breathed a sigh of relief that the brutal narcissist who dominated the previous chapter has faded from this story. Unfortunately, he returns mere paragraphs after we left him. In 1911, First National Bank of Greenville, Mississippi released The Truth About the Boll Weevil, written by Alfred Stone and his partner at Dunleith Plantation, Julian Fort. Stone and Fort argued that boll weevil destruction was the result of a combination of regional environmental characteristics and social and economic organization. They asserted that the Delta—reifying once again the plantation-environment as “the natural order of things”—was far enough north and east that destruction from the boll weevil was not inevitable. The deciding factor in determining the boll weevil's destruction, they argued, would be the ability to avoid “business and labor panics.” They urged planters that “we cannot make cotton without labor, and we cannot hold our labor if we pursue the suicidal policy of not only becoming frightened

---

68 This is not to call into question Daniel's extensive body of scholarship, which represents an invaluable contribution to southern agricultural history. Daniel's writing style, however, can sometimes serve to naturalize the very agrarian changes that he interrogates with such skill and attention to detail. In particular, writers seem to have trouble separating themselves from fraught phrases like “gradually disappeared” and “faded away” when writing about the decline of black-operated farms. On the contrary—and a central point of this thesis—this decline was often violent, and far from inevitable.

69 Stone, A. H., & Fort, J. H. (1910). The truth about the boll weevil: Being some observations on cotton growing under boll weevil conditions in certain areas of Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi. Greenville, Miss. Greenville is in Washington County, adjacent to the Mississippi River in the middle portion of the Mississippi Delta. It has long been one of the centers of economic and political power in the Delta.
ourselves, but of showing our fright to our negroes.” 70 Stone, like many planters, was afraid of the mobility of black labor. As Giesen argues, “planters and other white Deltans saw tenants’ emigration in the face of the boll weevil as evidence of simple-minded fright, rather than a realistic, even technically sophisticated, understanding of the pest by the farmers who worked that soil and the cotton crop year after year.” 71

In a letter to a Washington, D.C. journal editor, Stone's tone is more panicked, though he retains his purportedly-objective prose. “During the fifteen years in which I have been planting cotton,” he writes, “I have never known as much agitation of the general subject of the negro on the plantation as there has been this winter.” 72 Stone's fear is palpable; “the boll weevil is the greatest enemy which has yet appeared in the history of cotton.” 73 He resurrects the argument in the American Race Problem that the response to crisis and technological change is a test of racial worth. “The measure of the negro's ability to grow cotton under the conditions likely to confront him in the territory East of the Mississippi,” he asserts, “will be his adaptability to those changes and his capacity to become part of the industrial revolution.” 74

Stone's reckoning of the impending boll weevil crisis calls for technologically-driven shifts in production and an entrenchment of racial control. His racial classification always renders assertions of black independence as inferiority—black mobility, to Stone,

70 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
is the root of poverty—and the exploitative economic order as a sign of white superiority and adaptability. “The cupidity of the white man is a trait as old as the race,” Stone writes, “while certain characteristics of the negro masses seem at times to render the situation hopeless. Under the new order, the white man has in his greater intelligence and keener appreciation of the necessity of mending his ways, an advantage over the negro...They fled from Louisiana like rats from a sinking ship; what warrant have we to imagine that they will not similarly desert us when we are attacked.”

Feigning, as always, oblivion to the fact that black landownership worked against the white control of labor and land he was very much invested in, Stone positions the weevil as the proving ground of racial worth. Introducing the typology of racial advancement—laborer, tenant and landowner—he assumes the tone of an objective observer:

The progress of these groups, the emerging of the higher from the lower, marks the progress of the agricultural negro in the South. This is the true test of progress, rather than the mere increase of property by those in the highest group. On the other hand, a falling back of landowners or independent renters into the class of supervised plantation negroes, or of the higher classes of the latter into that of day laborers, means a loss of ground by the agricultural negro as a whole. It is predicted by some that the boll weevil will create conditions which the independent renter cannot meet, and that the ranks of the wage earner will be augmented by negroes from both the higher groups. It is on the other hand predicted by some that increased severity of conditions will only serve to stimulate the negro of all these groups, and that the economic revolution which is impending throughout the cotton South will help the negro no less than the white man. I venture nothing in the field of prophecy, one way or the other. But I am vitally concerned in the outcome, and shall observe the approaching contest with anxious interest. When the issue has been

---

Ibid.
determined, I shall have something more to say on the subject of negro agricultural labor.76

If landownership was indeed a test of racial worth, Stone was proven wrong even as he wrote. Between 1900 and 1910, the number of black farm owners increased by 17% (greater than the 12% increase in white-owned farms), and the value of land owned by blacks more than doubled in that decade.77 Delta planters, including Stone, faced two threats. In the advance of the boll weevil, they saw a threat to the plantation economy of cotton production. In black landownership, moreover, Stone saw a threat to the control of labor and land, and to his plantationist system of racial classification. Both were threats to white control of Delta agriculture. Planters identified the mobilization against the boll weevil as a means to reinforce racial control. Race in the Delta, then, was formed in relation to cotton production and the threats to its success. Mobilization against pests was from its conception a racial politics of ownership and control, and this historical context has very real material consequences that stretch into the present day.

I have returned to Stone in order to point out crucial intersections of discourse and material power that would shape the co-development of plantation agriculture and state-funded agricultural research. First, it was central to the agri-political project that the Delta be naturalized as a place where cotton was grown, with a concomitant naturalization of the white elite power structure. This was the act of continued territorialization of the Delta. Second, the elite used threats like the boll weevil to

76 Ibid.
legitimize and intensify power inequalities in the Delta. Third, the continued power of the plantation elite became increasingly dependent upon the direction and control of agricultural research and development—and access to the fruits of that research would be zealously guarded by the plantation elite. As Stone inconsistently admitted, plantation agriculture was absolutely dependent upon black labor. Without the exploitation of this labor, Stone would have been deprived the luxury of writing page upon page of racial theory. If black workers were thoughtless machines as his racial ideology asserted, those ordering theories would have been unnecessary. Similarly, the development of agro-industry was shaped by a tension between the dependence upon black labor and the fear of black independence through farmownership and mobility. Stoneville—like Stone himself—was dependent upon the exploitation of black labor, and fundamentally shaped by this fact.

Despite the spread of the boll weevil, Mississippi extension bulletins urged against the abandonment of cotton. In 1917, researchers speculated that “with the spread of the boll weevil over the rest of the cotton-producing States—they will probably all be covered in two or three more years—the total yield will be less; and since the demand is likely to increase, prices will be good.” Cotton was, as Stone and Fort's pamphlet made clear, a deeply entrenched system of social and economic control in the Delta. The agricultural research state in Mississippi—and particularly in the Delta—was intertwined with plantation agriculture system. The question, then, was not simply one of the

---

profitability of cotton. Planter power and the institutional authority of agricultural research were both heavily invested in the continued dominance of cotton as a cash crop. Moreover, new sectors interested in the expansion of cotton were emerging even as the boll weevil's range expanded.

At Stoneville, a tight relationship between private capital and public research was established almost from the outset. For example, Stoneville facilitated the development of a growing seed industry—in fact, it is difficult to draw lines between the public research at Stoneville and the emerging private seed manufacturers. The increasing commitment to cottonseed breeding at Stoneville is evident by 1922 when W. E. Ayres, a cotton breeder, became superintendent of the Delta Branch Experiment Station.79 By that year, as well, Early C. Ewing was the cotton geneticist at Delta & Pine Land) Plantation, a massive plantation owned by British textile manufacturers. Although employed by D&PL, he was listed as a “collaborator” with the experiment station.80 Ewing was formerly an agronomist at the Delta Branch Experiment Station, and Delta & Pine Land's general manager J. W. Fox was formerly the superintendent of the Delta Branch Experiment Station. Fox and Ewing were only the first in a series of researchers who went on to work at Delta & Pine Land, evidencing the ever-tighter connection between

79 Bowman, D. H., & Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station. (1986)., p. 11.

My engagement with D&PL in this thesis is limited, but I intend to do far more extensive research at the PhD level. It has been a long-lived actor in the development of agro-industry in the Delta in spite of many changes, and is currently a biotechnology subsidiary of Monsanto. For more on the plantation, see: Dong, Z. (1993). *From postbellum plantation to modern agribusiness: A history of the Delta and Pine Land Company;* Nelson, L. J. (1999). *King Cotton's advocate: Oscar G. Johnston and the New Deal.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
“public” research and plantation capital. In 1919, over half of the cottonseed varieties tested at the experiment station were public varieties. By 1921, however, only one third of the varieties were public, and Delta & Pine Land Co. Number 1, Number 2, and Number 3 made their debut. The impetus for cottonseed research doubtless increased with the enactment of a state law requiring that at least 250 acres at the Parchman State Penitentiary Plantation be planted in seeds recommended by the Delta Branch Experiment Station.

Monthly bulletins from the experiment station indicate an increasing emphasis on the use of the best seeds and fertilizer to maximize cotton productivity in the Delta, boll weevil be damned. As a report from Stoneville suggests, Delta “cotton growers” were “eager to learn how to farm under boll weevil conditions.” Although cotton production declined in the Delta between 1918 and 1920, production levels remained much higher there than in the rest of the state. Cotton prices did increase significantly between 1917 and 1919, but planters were loath to share the profits with the sharecroppers and tenants who worked the land. The labor demands required in order to maintain high cotton production in spite of the boll weevil were significant. In addition to the strenuous work normally required to produce cotton, the Station recommended that “first, in the fall we

82 Bowman, D. H., & Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station. (1986)., p. 12.
83 During this same period of time information on breeding cottonseeds, formerly a regular item in the research bulletins, virtually disappears. This represents a privatization of public research to a certain extent, but also, I contend, a strengthening public-private white supremacist alliance.
should remove the food of the weevils; second, we should destroy the hibernating places." The experiment station recommended that weevils be picked off by hand, and the cotton stalks removed and burned after the harvest.

By 1920, poisoning by calcium arsenate was advocated by the Mississippi experiment stations as the preferred means of dealing with the weevil. At Delta & Pine Land Plantation, where plantation management exercised particularly-strict control over agricultural practices, Early C. Ewing pressed for the extensive use of the chemical. Sharecroppers were given no choice but to use calcium arsenate, and half the price of the insecticide was charged to their account, as were the medical bills incurred because of exposure to the toxic substance.

Sharecroppers bore the burden of increased labor and toxic exposure, but saw very little of the profit from rising cotton prices, since planters militated against any the demands of black workers. Threats to plantation control were met with various forms of white resistance, and as we saw with Stone, direct physical violence was always an available option. Across the river in the Arkansas Delta, between 200 and 856 black men, women and children were massacred by vigilantes and federal troops after blacks in the Arkansas Delta become organized in the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of

---

86 Ibid., p. 29.
The high cotton prices wouldn't last for long, anyway. In 1920, the growing surplus of cotton—and planters in the Delta certainly contributed through their insistence upon cotton as the primary cash crop—plummeted from 37.5 cents a pound to a mere 14.8 cents a pound. Surpluses, impossible without the exploitation of black labor and application of calcium arsenate, would depress cotton prices throughout the 1920s. In 1929, the bottom dropped out.

Figure 1: Poisoning

This figure, accompanying the Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station’s boll weevil eradication recommendations for 1922, is a clear reminder that labor and risk have been unequally distributed from the very beginnings of industrial agriculture in the South. In this scene, two black youth operate a mule-driven wagon to spray calcium arsenate on a test plot of cotton. None of the early station literature cautions that

---


“boll weevil poison” was also extremely poisonous to humans, though the acute toxicity of the compound leaves little doubt that ample evidence was available.\(^91\)

### III. Surplus Control and the New Deal-Planter Alliance

As historian James C. Cobb (1992) points out, federal involvement in the wake of the cataclysmic 1927 Mississippi River flood heralded a new paradigm in the relationship between the plantation elite and the federal government:

The extended period of civil war, military occupation, and conflict and the memories and myths of Reconstruction left Delta planters sensitive to the point of paranoia about the prospect of external interference in their affairs. Yet by the end of the 1920s, the federal government, through its support for flood-control efforts, had already played a major role in the Delta’s transformation from a swampy wilderness to a modern cotton kingdom...not only did Congress appropriate $325 million for a flood-control system for the region, but planters learned as well that, when properly directed, federal assistance programs could reinforce, rather than undermine, the existing economic order.\(^92\)

Through flood control programs, Delta agriculture was primed for the massive influx of federal funds that the New Deal agriculture programs would represent. The transformed and expanded levee system increased arable land dramatically, and several scholars have documented the control Delta planters maintained over the levee programs.\(^93\) As John Barry details in *Rising Tide*, Washington County planter Leroy Percy, who controlled federal relief programs in the Delta, was preoccupied with black labor. “The South must

---


not be dependent for its prosperity on the Negro,” Percy echoed Stone's articulation of “The Race Problem”, “There is not enough of him, and what there is is not good enough.” Working in tandem, Percy and Stone had attempted to secure Italian labor as a solution to the perpetual labor “shortage”. Underlying their concern, however, was a fear of black independence. Percy used the Red Cross to establish concentration camps. Responding to the forced detainment of blacks, Percy merely replied; “If we depopulate the Delta of its labor we should be doing it a grave disservice.”

On the eve of the sweeping changes in Delta agriculture brought about by federal capital and New Deal reforms, there were more African American farm owners than at any other point in southern history—the 1920 Census of Agriculture revealed a peak both in the number of farms, and the number of black-owned farms. Fluctuating cotton prices, the boll weevil, location on marginal lands, and the opposition of planters kept black farmers in a position of vulnerability to the verge of the sweeping changes that were to come. Control of levee construction and federal capital provided leverage to planters like Stone and Percy, and the New Deal shifted the balance even more decisively in their favor.

Along with the river and the boll weevil, the volatility of cotton prices threatened the security of plantation agriculture in the Delta. In 1919, the market price of cotton was

95 Ibid., pp. 111-115.
35 cents a pound, but the price plummeted to 17 cents a pound in 1921. 98 The stock market crash in 1929 further depressed the price of cotton, which fell to 5.7 cents a pound by 1931. 99 Overproduction crises were all-but-inherent to an entrenched political and economic system so zealously maintained as the cotton plantation economy. For plantation owners, profit could be found in the exploitation of sharecroppers and the enforcement of exploitative sharecropping contracts. 100 For sharecroppers and tenants who remained—of their own volition or through coercion—in the cotton economy, the primary path through the narrow window of upward mobility was through increased production. During market crises, this was sometimes the only means of survival. Production increases were immediately profitable to planters, and overproduction, like the other threats to the cotton economy, provided opportunity—accustomed as planters were to profiting from the crises that they caused.

The Agricultural Adjustment Act—enacted by Congress in 1933—ostensibly aimed to reduce agricultural commodity surpluses, end overproduction crises in United States agriculture, and ensure better farm prices. 101 The act provided government payments for acreage reductions in cotton, but there was little to ensure that the compensations would reach sharecroppers and tenants who were forced to destroy their crops. The subsidization of crop reduction by the AAA also raised barriers to farm

---

99 Ibid., p. 35.
100 This rampant abuse has been extensively documented by scholars like Cobb and Woodruff. That planters explicitly considered exploitative labor arrangements an essential component of profit and control is evident in Alfred Holt Stone's "plantation experiment," as detailed in the previous chapter, and his emphasis of "cupidity" as an inherent white quality, cited earlier in this chapter.
ownership for non-owners by increasing the value of land, as future subsidies were tied to
the land. The period of the New Deal saw an increasing number of wage laborers,
along with a sharp increase in farm foreclosures. The meager New Deal programs that
favored work relief and direct payments to agricultural workers were often strongly
opposed at the state and local levels. Governor Eugene Talmadge of Georgia, for
example, opposed the relief on the grounds that it was “ruining” that type of worker.
The New Deal focused, more than anything else, on surplus reduction, and was thus most
advantageous for farmers with large landholdings and substantial production, a bias
which has characterized Delta agriculture through the present day.

The New Deal, and in particular the AAA, would help set the stage for the
transition of plantation agriculture into agro-industry. As with the flood control
programs, the New Deal served to channel federal funds to Delta white supremacists.
Most accounts of the role of the New Deal in the remaking of southern agriculture,
however, fail to attend to its particular manifestations and dynamics in place. As a
consequence, the New Deal is—like the rise of agro-industry—attributed some mythical,
external power. Two white Mississippians, however, were prominent in the AAA, and
actively shaped New Deal cotton policy for the benefit of plantation agriculture. From
the perspective of Delta agriculture, the New Deal represented a missed opportunity for
redistributive justice—enacting, in effect, the opposite—and signaled the beginning of a

long era of southern plantationist influence in national agricultural policy—a period that has profoundly shaped agriculture in the present day.

Since sharecroppers and small black farmers were more vulnerable to the boom and bust cycles of the cotton economy, any attempt to regulate southern agriculture might seem like a promising development. Southern “conservatives” in powerful positions in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, however, were positioned to ensure that the benefits of federal involvement were not shared equally. A cotton committee was convened in Washington in order to make recommendations for the agricultural adjustment act. The committee was comprised of six white southerners, including Alfred Holt Stone.\textsuperscript{104} This committee warned that although surplus reduction was necessary, “There must be no slackening of efforts to increase the efficiency of cotton production,” in order to maintain United States “supremacy in the cotton industry of the world.”\textsuperscript{105} In order to maintain this supremacy, the planning committee recommended urged that the AAA incorporate a significant cotton research and extension component.\textsuperscript{106} This meeting represents a key moment in the translation of Stone's strategy of “racial competition” into New Deal policy. Soon thereafter, to white Mississippi agriculturalists were named to the key positions in the cotton section of the AAA. Cully Cobb, born in Tennessee but trained in the Mississippi Agricultural Extension network, was named Chief of the Cotton


This committee demands further research, potentially serving as a moment to interrogate the almost direct application of Stone's racial ideology into policy.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid. p. 4.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid. p. 4.

Cully Cobb was trained at Mississippi Agricultural and Mechanical College, and had risen to prominence through agricultural extension work and as an editor of the \textit{Southern Ruralist} farm paper.\footnote{Scott, R.V. & Shoalmire, J.G. (1973). \textit{The Public Career of Cully A. Cobb: A Study in Agricultural Leadership}. Jackson, Miss.: University and College Press of Mississippi. p. 118. \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 155-156. \textit{Winders, W. (2009).}} Though he was not a Delta planter, his brand of conservative agrarian populism was hardly at odds with plantation politics. He viewed declining black populations in southern states as a sign of progress, and considered the Delta & Pine Land Company an exemplary operation.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 155-156.} On the level of federal policy, his conviction that production controls were necessary, and his desire to secure “equality for agriculture” dovetailed nicely with the intentions of Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, who was by no means a radical.\footnote{\textit{Winders, W. (2009).}} As Cobb stated in 1926:

> The farm must demand a national economic policy that will include agriculture along with industry, labor, and capital....At present, agriculture is left to root, hog, or die, while industry is protected by a tariff wall raised to the height of complete embargo in many cases, and labor is protected with stringent immigration laws, and the return upon capital has been stabilized and made as secure as it is humanly possible to do it.\footnote{\textit{Southern Ruralist}, Vol. 36 (July 14, 1929). in Scott & Shoalmire 1973, p. 189.}

Cobb's commitment to stabilizing cotton, and his feeling that agriculture (aggregated and undifferentiated) was getting short shrift put him in an ideal position to ensure that Delta planters' dual obsession with cotton and labor translated well to national
policy. He urged for the development of a “united front” for national agriculture. This “national agricultural unity” emphasized technology-driven productivity, evocative of the homogenization of agriculture (both racially and technologically) and the emergent agricultural nationalism that would take an almost-militaristic approach to expanding overseas markets for agricultural commodities.112

A fine complement to Cobb, Oscar Johnston—the manager of Delta & Pine Land Plantation—was appointed as director of the finance division of the AAA.113 Johnston, born and raised in Friars Point, in Coahoma County, ensured that the Delta cotton bloc's hardline obsession with racial control was fully represented in the AAA. Much as Cobb attributed some metaphysical meaning to the farm, Johnston anthropomorphized cotton: “Cotton has been whispering. Cotton can speak but its voice has been as soft as its fiber and as low as its price.”114 Cobb's essentialization of an undifferentiated agriculture, and Johnston's humanization of cotton translated easily into AAA policy through national-level reification of “the farm” and glorification of “the farmer.” In 1932, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt handed over the first check as the highly-publicized inauguration of the cotton plow-up program, “the farmer” was given a face. He was William E. Morris, a white cotton tenant from Texas.115

114 Ibid., p. 183.
Four years later, speaking to a group of black farmers in Texas, Cully Cobb reminded them that:

The blanket accusation that AAA has hurt colored farmers more than it has helped them has frequently been accompanied by a more specific indictment. You have heard quite frequently, no doubt, the charge that the adjustment programs have forced thousands upon thousands of Negroes off the land. That an unscrupulous landlord here and there has taken advantage of his tenants, just as a few unscrupulous tenants have taken advantage of their landlords, cannot be denied. But the charge that the AAA has been responsible for any appreciable displacement of tenants, whether white or colored, isn't true...The problems of the white farmer and the colored farmer are the same problems. A policy which helps one helps the other. There is no place for race prejudice in any national program for the welfare of agriculture [emphasis added].

Cobb was not responding to idle accusations. In its stated goal of reducing the cotton surplus and increasing the price of cotton, the AAA had been successful. Harvested cotton was reduced by 15 million acres and 4 million bales between 1930 and 1934, and the price received by farmers per pound doubled between 1931 and 1934.

The USDA, however, had been a site for conflict over the future of agriculture, and the AAA in particular was harshly criticized for favoring planters over the small farmers, tenants and sharecroppers who actually worked the land. In practice, large landowners were using the acreage reduction program to force tenants and sharecroppers from land, and taking advantage of the AAA payments to move their operations further in the

---

direction capital intensive agriculture. Contrary to Cobb's assertion, it is thoroughly established that the AAA benefited large white landowners at the expense of black farmers and sharecroppers.119 Woodruff (2003) has documented the extent of planter manipulation of the AAA program in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta. The section of the Agricultural Adjustment Act that ensured parity prices for acreage reduction, for example, was written by Oscar Johnston, and the requirement that planters share the parity payments with tenants and sharecroppers was hardly enforced.120 The wording of the acreage reduction contract stated that landowners were to attempt “in good faith to bring about the reduction of acreage in such a manner as to cause the least possible amount of labor, economic and social disturbance [emphasis added].”121

The “in good faith” clause effectively absolved the federal government of any action against planter abuses of the program, and an AAA investigation of the many consequent complaints of tenants and sharecroppers unsurprisingly found that “A majority percentage of these complaints was found to be without foundation and arising largely out of misinformation.”122 In addition to the planter bias in the enforcement—or lack thereof—of tenant and sharecropper rights in the plow-up program, the payments were tied to the per-acre productivity of the land. Payments for land that formerly

122 Ibid., p. 59.
yielded 100-124 pounds of cotton per acre were only $7, while owners of land yielding 275 or more pounds were compensated at $20 per acre. 123 In effect, the AAA plow-up program acted as an inequality intensifier for plantation agriculture, rewarding those who had the capital and the technology access to adopt the stated national goals of efficiency and productivity—overwhelmingly, white planters. Contradictorily, this productivity and efficiency rewarded and encouraged by the AAA program had contributed to the overproduction crisis in the first place. In this way, the AAA increased the ability of the state to select which farmers were successful. These privileged farmers were—it hardly bears saying—the planters who rarely touched the soil.

IV. Opportunities

Planter control of the cotton section of the AAA was contested both within the USDA and in the fields and towns of the rural South. To view the planter bias of New Deal policies in the South as merely misguided, then, would be to ignore the resistance that was readily visible to Secretary Wallace and the New Deal Democrats in Washington. The policies of the New Deal that favored plantation agriculture were not accepted blindly and willingly by sharecroppers and tenant farmers. In the Delta, the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU) formed as a response to dispossession and the unequal application of New Deal policies. 124 Planters reacted to the STFU with increasing violence. Members and organizers were jailed, and the demands of the union

123 Ibid., p. 15.
were largely ignored by the USDA.\textsuperscript{125} In rural Louisiana, organization of black farmers and tenants in the Sharecroppers Union and the National Farmers Union led to the creation of the interracial Louisiana Farmers Union.\textsuperscript{126}

The failure of the USDA to effectively respond to the demands of those most directly harmed by the AAA represented the prioritization of plantation agriculture over the welfare of the vast majority of farmers—the tenants, sharecroppers, and smallholders. Indeed, there were exemplary programs that Wallace and Roosevelt could have drawn upon if they truly wanted to challenge planter power in southern agriculture and politics. The Farmer Security Administration provided loans to many small farmers, and the Resettlement Administration provided aid to displaced tenants and sharecroppers, even creating a number of intentional communities for the displaced.\textsuperscript{127} One such settlement was Mileston, an all-black community in Holmes County, Mississippi. In Mileston, 136 farm units were established with help from the Resettlement Administration, and a cooperative was formed that is still operating.\textsuperscript{128}

Taken as a whole, however, the USDA was quite conservative, and such land reform programs were an exception, rather than the rule. There was a group within the USDA who supported the demands of tenants, sharecroppers and small farmers. Led by

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{125} Auerbach, J. (1968). “Southern Tenant Farmers: Socialist Critics of the New Deal”. The Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 27(2). p. 121.
\item \textsuperscript{128} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
undersecretary of agriculture Rexford Tugwell, this group raised the ire of the conservative agrarians who controlled the Cotton Section of the AAA. In 1934, Jerome Frank, the general counsel of the AAA, sent a telegram to all state offices in the South demanding that all cotton program contracts be enforced to favor tenants. Acquiescing to the demands of the pro-planter conservatives in the AAA, Secretary of Agriculture Wallace led a purge of Frank and other northern liberals responsive to the demands of sharecroppers and tenant farmers.\footnote{Winders, W. (2009)., p. 65.} This represented a victory for the plantation bloc, unwilling to countenance any serious threat to their power in the AAA. Cully Cobb, speaking this time before a group of white farmers in Arkansas, made it clear where he stood on reformist programs within the USDA. Eleanor Roosevelt, Cobb said, “could make an enormously important contribution to the restoration of confidence by lending her powerful influence toward helping to eliminate social reform from our Government programs and by frowning upon activities that make for bad relationships between our white people and our colored people.”\footnote{Cobb, C.A. (April 16, 1938.) “The Farmer Today and Tomorrow.” Mississippi State University Charm Digital Archives; Cully A. Cobb Papers. Available online at: http://digital.library.msstate.edu/cdm/ref/collection/charm/id/24111} In Cobb's estimation, any attempt to address the tremendous inequalities in southern agriculture made for racial disharmony. In that regard, he had little need to worry about the New Deal. The New Deal was increasingly invested in plantation agriculture, and the political power of planters assured policies conducive to “good relationships”—better understood as elite political and economic control.
One need look no further than the AAA payments to see evidence of just how favorable the Agricultural Adjustment Act was to Mississippi planters. In 1933 alone, $1,406,064 in cotton payments were given to the top 84 plantations. Delta & Pine Land Company, headed by the very Oscar Johnston in charge of the finance division of the AAA, received $114,840 in 1933 and $102,408 the following year. As might be expected, the massive sum attracted the attention of the national press. The Chicago Tribune highlighted the fact that “The ordinary farmer on an ordinary farm in Illinois, Iowa, Indiana or Missouri” received limited benefits from the AAA while the “big money went to the big plantations.”

V. The Cotton God and Mechanization.

In 1936, as Delta & Pine Land's federal windfall entered the national conversation, the press also took note of the demonstration of a mechanical cotton picker at Stoneville. The New York Times worried that a mechanical picker could “…drive northward a large Negro population, with resulting ill effects on wage levels for unskilled labor.” National attention to the plantation South, with its limited focus on displacement and federal payments, did little to disrupt plantation politics in the Delta. Even as plantation agriculture diversified in response to the AAA, the plantation bloc organized around cotton as a commodity, taking advantage of the national gospel of productivity. 'Round the World With Cotton, a 1941 USDA publication with a foreword

131 Ibid., pp. 34, 47.
by the Secretary of Agriculture, offers a glimpse of the discourses being mobilized to justify plantation agriculture in this era of transformation.\textsuperscript{134} Cotton is an employer, the authors insisted, since “13,500,000 people in the United States are directly dependent for at least a substantial part of their livelihood on the cotton crop.”\textsuperscript{135} The health and wealth of the Nation were tied to the future of cotton, the bulletin urged: “Did you realize how greatly we are indebted to cottonseed for the many things that contribute to our comfort and happiness?”\textsuperscript{136} However, they argue, cotton production methods needed to be improved, since “the trend in all production processes in the United States—both agricultural and industrial—has been toward the universal use of power and machinery. These are the servants which, together with our national resources, make possible the wealth and prosperity of the Nation.”\textsuperscript{137}

There is a glaring contradiction in the USDA publication: cotton is of crucial importance because it employs so many people, but cotton must be made more efficient and the labor hours that go into its production need to be reduced. This is “The Social Problem”—the displacement of farm labor. Cotton consumers were told that “there are many owners of large farms in the South who would use more farm machinery except for the fact that such a change would not permit them to retain workers who may have been on the farm for many years.”\textsuperscript{138} The insidious paternalism of the USDA bulletin translated well to a national political discourse that conceded the South to plantation

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Ibid} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 3.
\bibitem{Ibid2} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 5.
\bibitem{Ibid3} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 117.
\bibitem{Ibid4} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 117.
\end{thebibliography}
interests, and viewed black migration to the North as a “race problem”. The problem at the national level was defined in terms of a couple of binary oppositions that served plantationist interests. In the bulletin, the alternative to displacement can only be employment, and the solution to inefficiency must be productivity. These binaries underwrite two privileged subjects—the “American consumer” and the “American farmer”—bound together with that one glorious commodity, cotton. Made invisible by the cotton fetish is black labor—depicted as machine-like and dependent if on the farm, a problem if displaced.

The story of cotton, the framing of the problems, stand in the way of any substantive questions of the ownership of land and the control of agriculture. The cotton bloc thus shielded themselves against any criticism from without, or any structural change through federal action. The new cotton regime—diversifying, mechanizing, becoming ever more dependent upon chemicals—would be productive of new assemblages of racial violence and exclusion. As 'Round the World With Cotton was released by the USDA, the Delta plantation bloc was mobilizing along similar lines. Central to their material and political project: the emphasis on productivity, a hostility to black labor and independence, and continued concentration of landownership. This mobilization deserves close attention, as the cotton yarns spun in the first half of the 20th century remain interwoven with defenses of agribusiness and Delta Council discourses in the present day.
Figure 2: “Organized, Unified, Co-ordinated”

Images from the Delta Council’s inaugural, self-congratulatory history. The book, released in 1943, was subtitled “The Story of Great Men Doing a Great Work.”

Perhaps emboldened by the successful incorporation of plantation interests in the New Deal, and certainly sensing the need for a coordinated white front as agriculture changed and black resistance grew, a group of planters and their allies formed the Delta Council in 1938. At a meeting at the agricultural research station in Stoneville, the group formed as an alliance of plantation interests, agricultural researchers, and extension

---

The experience with the AAA indicated that southern white supremacy need only be—at most—thinly veiled to translate into national policy, and the early documents of the Delta Council are not timid in their self-description. “Organized, Unified, Coordinated” boasts the title of their first history, “A Story of Great Men Doing A Great Work (Figure 2).” Advocating for the welfare of a Delta tied to the health of cotton and productivity of agriculture in the global economy proved a remarkably tractable translation of plantation white supremacy into a national narrative.

A 1948 article in the *New York Times* gives a hint of just how successful the branding of the Delta Council was at the national level. It reads like a Delta Council press release ever-so-slightly slightly moderated by a white liberal conception of a South full of dependent blacks and anachronistic social relations. The Delta, the article goes, is a rich land, but “handicapped by economic and social factors that are peculiar to the Deep South...Rich as it is, the Delta has problems which can be resolved only by action on a broad front.” The “people of the Delta”—implicitly white, of course—“are engaged in one of the most thorough and challenging development programs ever launched in the Mississippi valley. Sponsored by the Delta Council, a federation of agricultural interests formed to promote the Delta's welfare, the program is aimed at both material and social betterment.” But what is betterment, the reader may ask—what are these heroes of the Delta doing to save their desolate region? Excellent question: “The greatest

---

conservation problem is flood control; the number one social concern is the Negro; and the ruling factor in the lives of all is an anachronistic plantation system.”

In this account the ownership and direction of the plantation system are left un-interrogated, and instead its outdated nature is identified as the problem. White supremacy and racial exploitation are certainly never mentioned. For this reason, the Delta Council—largely comprised of planters—could position itself nationally as the only group capable of transforming the “anachronistic plantation system” and dealing with “the number one social concern.” There were many ways to do this. Chief among these, though, were the suppression of labor and the continued procurement of federal funding for the transformation of that outdated system—still in the same hands, mind you, for anything else would be unthinkable.

VI. Migration, White Anxiety, and the Council’s Delta

In 1940, one year before the entry of the United States into World War II (temporarily) eclipsed such concerns, the rural-urban migration from southern agricultural regions had attracted enough concern to merit a special committee of the US House of Representatives: The Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens. These hearings were held in several United States cities, but the hearings held in Montgomery, Alabama are of particular relevance to this thesis. In particular, I am interested in the discursive construction of black migration as a problem,

and the ways in which the Delta's agricultural elite—including the Delta Council—positioned themselves as the caretakers of the Delta and its inhabitants.143

The membership of the Congressional committee was comprised of Congressmen who, it would appear, established themselves as the authorities on the movement of problematically non-white bodies. The committee chairman, John H. Tolan of California, would one year later later head the Tolan Committee, which recommended that Japanese-Americans be placed in concentration camps.144 In fact, three of the five members on the Tolan Committee were members on the Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, including John J. Sparkman, from Alabama. Into this framing—Sparkman baldly referred to it as the “migrant problem” rather than the “migration problem”—the white elite were more than willing to insert themselves as the caretakers of the Delta, while advancing their own agenda for agricultural change.145 Oscar Johnston (the aforementioned manager of Delta & Pine Land and director of the finance section of the AAA had recently formed the National Cotton Council as an interest group) was confident enough to provide a statement that:

The National Cotton Council of America recommends as a solution for this problem Federal control of interstate migratory labor. Unemployed persons,

143 The Delta Council's unabashed self-aggrandizement has served as an invaluable ally in my research, as I was sent in the direction of these hearings by a boast in an early Delta Council publication that the testimony of members “served as a rebuff to claims of the Southern Sharecroppers' Union and counteracted claims directed at this section as a dumping ground for migratory labor.” Delta Council. (1943). *The Yazzoo-Mississippi Delta: Organized, Unified, Coordinated*. Stoneville, Miss. pp. 15-16.
asking seasonal employment in agriculture, *should not be permitted to migrate* from one state or another unless such persons are able to furnish satisfactory evidence of... definite employment at adequate wage levels [emphasis added].\(^{146}\)

Both Oscar Johnston and the Delta Council (who submitted Johnston's statement at the hearing) were more than willing to exploit the framing of black migrants as a problem population in order to pursue their own agendas for the control of labor and the mechanization of agriculture. The Delta Council's successful defense of their role was all-but-guaranteed by the way in which the migration of the black “population”—rather than exploitation and inequality—was defined as a problem in the hearings. The Delta Council merely needed to state that they were not causing the migration of a population defined as problematic. The questions of control and ownership within agriculture are hardly leveled at the Delta Council. Rather, they were prompted (and happy to comply, for that matter) to argue that the Delta Council was maintaining relations of plantation paternalism.

At the same time as they insisted that black workers weren't being displaced, the members of the Delta Council took advantage of the hearings in order to advance their agenda for agricultural change in the Delta. Read Dunn, Jr., the secretary general of the Delta Council, stated that “the burdensome influence of excess population on agriculture in general must be recognized”, while at the same time insisting that the population in the Delta had remained stable.\(^{147}\) In the process, he seizes the opportunity to advocate

\(^{146}\) *Ibid.*., p. 613.

changes that would only increase the precariously of agricultural labor and small farmers:

Assistance to the farmer should be self-liquidating, and obligations should extend only for such periods as will not bind him to the land for life and prevent his moving to more remunerative [sic] occupation should the opportunity arise. It is important that the espirit de corp of the agricultural group and the elasticity of the system be preserved. To assure maximum efficiency and greatest productivity, any program should be supervised and directed by competent technicians. As unit of a program the family size farm should be encouraged cautiously. Commercial units of this size are proving less economic and less productive in the technological process. A question also can be raised as to the need for additional agricultural production, and the idea of self-sufficiency is false with little if any of the produce consumed by the farm.148

In this testimony, we see the politics of scale being obliquely deployed as a racial politics of marginalization and control. Of course, this strategy had its antecedents in the earlier developments of the agricultural research state and the AAA cotton program, and the leadership of the Delta Council had already becoming relatively fluent in the discourse of the new racial politics of agriculture. The “family size farm” is “less economic and less productive”, and instead “elasticity” and “maximum efficiency” must be pursued. Dunn clumsily dances around the racial project of the Delta Council: “With labor demands constantly changing in every field, it is impossible, furthermore, to adequately fit certain populations into particular fields of endeavor. To do so will ultimately create a static economy.”149

Though Dunn claims that it is impossible to “adequately fit certain populations into particular fields of endeavor,” the Delta Council was preoccupied with maintaining

the upper hand in their dealings with “certain populations,” namely black farmers and agricultural laborers. Dunn closes his statement with the argument that federal regulations should prohibit “luring labor from [the] region for illicit purposes.”150 The Delta Council was, in fact, preoccupied with controlling the mobility of agricultural workers and maintaining the cheapest wages possible. A 1943 publication, for example, confirmed their opposition to “any organization of farm labor as a dangerous movement which would serve to cause disunity and breaches of faith.” They asserted that the “plantation system, as a partnership, is successful only when there is mutual understanding and mutual effort.”151 The alleged mutuality of that partnership is belied by the planters' often-violent reaction to the demands of black workers, and their preoccupation with manufacturing dependence and maintaining control.

In the Congressional hearing, the Delta Council's claim that they were not the source of the “migrant problem” was supported by one of Dunn's aforementioned “competent technicians” of efficiency maximization. Homer McNamara, the superintendent of the Delta Branch Experiment Station in Stoneville, testified that a number of barriers existed to the full mechanization of Delta agriculture. Harvesting the cotton crop, he pointed out, required hand labor. No effective cotton picking machine had yet been developed, said McNamara, and any such machine would be quite

150 Ibid., p. 604. Considering Johnston and the National Cotton Council's recommendation to place legal restrictions on interstate migration, it is likely that “illicit purposes” is simply a veiled reference to any employment of blacks that the plantation bloc couldn't control.
expensive. In McNamara's account, the relative self-sufficiency of farms stood in the way of mechanization:

Probably the greatest resistance of all to further mechanization of Delta plantations lies in the fact that 56 percent of all cultivated land must be planted to crops other than cotton. In this case the operator can grow his own feed and produce his own workstock. He can grow his feed, and when prices are low avoid a large cash outlay for fuel, oil, and repairs. So long as this condition prevails there will not be the incentive to completely mechanize the plantations that there would have been under the old system of a single crop—cotton.\(^\text{152}\)

At Stoneville, however, McNamara and the Delta Branch Experiment Station were dedicated to producing technology that would intensify the inequalities in Delta agriculture. Under the banner of efficiency and increased productivity, the Delta Council and agricultural researchers directed federal research dollars in order to manufacture the very technology that would allow further mechanization of the cotton crop, and undermine the livelihoods of small farmers. As we have seen, the Delta Council was resolutely opposed to any equitable distribution of increased profits. In its ideal form—if the hearings are any indication—the Council's vision for the Delta perversely combined regional incarceration through restriction of mobility with dispossession through agricultural development. The Delta Branch Experiment Station was central to this political, economic and racial project.

\textit{VII. “Labor bottlenecks” and militant productivism}

Even as many blacks agricultural workers in the Delta were refusing to accept the inhumane wages and working conditions of plantation agriculture and pursuing better

employment in war industries, Mississippi researchers were increasingly focusing upon the labor “bottleneck” in cotton production. As Mississippi Farm Research bulletin states in 1944:

> The future of the cotton industry depends quite largely upon the mechanization of production. The extent to which cotton can successfully compete with synthetic fibers will be determined mostly by the ability of farmers to produce a low-priced, high-quality product. The preparation of land, planting, and cultivation of cotton have been mechanized to some extent by the use of tractor-drawn equipment. At the present time the labor required for hoeing and for picking is the greatest production cost. The high price of this labor, and the uncertainty of its being available, makes the production of cotton a hazardous undertaking.\(^{153}\)

It is reductive to simply state that sharecroppers and tenants were displaced by mechanization. The act of leaving the Delta, of refusing to accept the living conditions and payments dictated by the planters, was radical in its own right. In this respect, the increasing push to mechanize production was a response to the power that black Deltans possessed—the power to resist, to unsettle, to organize, and to migrate. As Woodruff points out, wages were indeed rising thanks to the increasing organization of agricultural labor in the Delta and the refusal of black workers to accept the conditions of Delta planters.\(^{154}\) Nevertheless, planters were preoccupied with keeping as many agricultural laborers as possible in the Delta and minimizing wages. Delta planters coordinated with draft boards to exempt agricultural labor, and would move workers to the top of the list for the draft if they didn't accept the working conditions.\(^{155}\) This coordination was


\(^{154}\) Woodruff (2003), pp. 207-208.

doubtless facilitated by the fact that agricultural extension agents headed the War Boards in the Delta.\textsuperscript{156} This gave extension agents another tool to enforce planter power—the ability to select who would go to war. Simultaneously, planters worked to obtain prisoners of war and seasonal migrant labor.\textsuperscript{157} In 1945, the establishment of a state wage ceiling at $2.10 per 100 pounds of cotton helped shift power back to planters.\textsuperscript{158}

Even as planters were fighting the demands of labor in the 1940s, however, agricultural research was increasingly targeted at the “bottleneck” that made this labor essential to cotton production. In part because of the uneven process of capital substitution in cotton production, agricultural labor was intensely seasonal in the Delta. In September, for example, approximately 72 times as much farm labor was necessary as in January.\textsuperscript{159} In the shift towards capital-intensive cotton production, planters worked to ensure a steady supply of labor in May, September, October and November, but were unwilling to pay workers wages that would sustain them throughout the year.

Agricultural research bulletins show that the welfare of workers is hardly a concern in the research at Stoneville, either. Labor is a cost that is incurred by planters, rather than a group profoundly impacted by agricultural change. If there was any meaningful “mutual effort” between planters and black sharecroppers and laborers, the research undertaken at Stoneville was targeted at further undermining the power of labor in plantation agriculture. At the same time, planters worked to suppress wages and

\textsuperscript{157} Woodruff (2003), pp. 207.
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 212.
\textsuperscript{159} McComas, P.S. & Welch, F.J. (October, 1943). “Farm Labor Requirements in Mississippi.” \textit{Mississippi Farm Research}, Vol. 6(10) p. 6.
organization in the name of “mutual understanding”. Even as agricultural researchers worked to ensure productivity increases in cotton production and bypass the “bottleneck” in plantation agriculture, Stoneville was itself dependent upon black workers. The role of black labor at Stoneville was obscured in most of the research bulletins or reduced to a begrudged item in production expenses, but was occasionally made undeniably clear (figure 3).

Figure 3: Research methods
This image represents one of the rare moments that the role of black workers in agricultural research (in this case, cotton variety productivity tests) is not completely obscured in a research station bulletin. Revealingly, however, the caption is simply “A field of cotton at the Delta Branch Experiment Station, Stoneville.” The only mention of human labor in the relatively lengthy article, moreover, is in the passive voice: “the first picking was made on August 17, and the final picking on October 12.”

The research objective at Stoneville was never the success of small farmers or the welfare of agricultural labor. While other research stations in Mississippi were producing some research relevant to small farmers, the research at Stoneville was aimed at reducing a dependence upon labor in plantation agriculture.\textsuperscript{161} Research was rigidly segregated by region and crop, and the dedication of Stoneville to the needs of plantations was barely in question. The objective was not to make the Delta a liveable region. Rather, it was to ensure the dominance of large-scale operations—almost without exception owned by white planters. Even as research at Stoneville aimed to eliminate labor as an expense and planters obsessed over the cost and demands of labor, farm commodity prices reached their highest level in a quarter century.\textsuperscript{162} Due in part to wartime demand, these high prices were sustained in the years immediately following World War II. The question, then, was not merely one of ensuring the profitability of agriculture by repressing and eliminating labor. It was also a question of ensuring that power and profit remained concentrated in the hands of the plantation bloc.

As researchers at Stoneville were enlisted in the transformation of the mechanisms of plantation agriculture, domestic inequalities were buried beneath rhetoric of agrarian patriotism. “America's agricultural production capacity”, read one 1943

\textit{Mississippi Farm Research} bulletin, “particularly as it refers to food, represents the

\textsuperscript{161} The Truck Crops Branch Station in South-Central Mississippi, for example, was specifically devoted to the needs of small-scale vegetable farmers.

greatest single potential weapon of war in our fight for liberation and freedom.” The more-violent weapons of war would, in fact, soon be drafted into the service of Delta agriculture. In 1937, German chemist Gerhard Schrader discovered organophosphates, and though they were effective as insecticides, they were also quite lethal to humans. The chemical warfare section of the German army soon created tabun, an organophosphate nerve gas. In 1946 Monsanto began manufacturing the first organophosphate insecticide in the United States, and a 1945 issue of *Mississippi Farm Research* would herald the American debut of “DDT, Wonder Insecticide, of Use on Farms.” By 1963, the majority of chemicals recommended by the Mississippi Extension Station for use against cotton pests in were organophosphates or organochlorines. Most are now banned for their toxicity to humans and other animals, but if cotton wasn't king in the 1940s Delta, productivity certainly was.

The Delta Council, meanwhile, was courted for their political power and for the Delta's strategic importance in national agriculture. On May 8, 1947, then-Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson made the first national announcement of what would become the Marshall Plan at the Delta Council annual meeting in Bolivar County. Agricultural commodities would be just as essential tools of US supremacy as bombs,

---

165 Ibid., p. 171
167 Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station. (May 1963.) “Cotton Insect Control, 1963.” *Mississippi Farm Research*, 26(5). p. 7. DDT is an organochlorine insecticide.
and the chemical compounds first used against human bodies would soon cover the Delta.

“You who live and work in this rich agricultural region,” Acheson began his address to the Delta Council, “whose daily lives are concerned with the growth and marketing of cotton and corn and other agricultural products, must derive a certain satisfaction from the fact that the greatest affairs of state never get very far from the soil.” With his speech, Acheson signaled a new era of Delta Council dominance in national politics. Though the speech was titled “The Requirements of Reconstruction”, he was hardly signaling a willingness to challenge the power of the planters—the national state had long abandoned the South to white supremacists. The plantation bloc was quick to tie nationalism with the defense of the Mississippi power structure and the interests of planters. In the words of Si Corley, the State Commissioner of Agriculture:

...in the name of the United States defense, if we are going to carry through and plant more cotton and also for the protection of our Southland and its historical background—we don't want all of it to move west—if we are going to have an increase in cotton next year, then we had better be told, I would say, before December 1 that we are going to have a contract for hoe hands, because no hoe hands is not going to be much of an increase [emphasis added].

Corley was using the Korean War to advocate for the procurement of cheap seasonal labor from Mexico, but the invocation of US nationalism to defend the interests of planters would extend to surplus control, price supports, and agricultural research. As agricultural production was increasingly mobilized as a geopolitical weapon, a Delta white supremacist was rising to a prominent position in the US House of Representatives.

---

Jamie L. Whitten's reactionary politics would shape the landscape of the Delta, and he is fittingly memorialized with the largest building at the Agricultural Research Station in Stoneville.
Chapter 4: “That We May Live”: Jamie Whitten and the Shifting Violences of Industrial Agriculture

Instead of Mississippi trying to conform and trying to go along with the rest of the states in this Union as they go down this line to integration and amalgamation, I think we should stand up and I believe the record shows that we can stand up. Yes, as chairman of the agricultural appropriations committee and as a member of that committee, I have proven time after time the way to get ahead is to stand up.

-Jamie Whitten campaign speech, 1962 170

I don't think you can work with this subject of agriculture, which is responsible for the protection of the American people from pest, disease, pestilence, and maintaining the highest standard of living that any country has ever enjoyed in history, without developing a real appreciation of its importance to the American people.

-Jamie Whitten in the U.S. House agricultural appropriations hearings, 1962 171

I. Introduction

In 1994, Jamie Whitten retired from the United States House of Representatives. Whitten entered Congress in 1941, and over his fifty-three year career in the House, he was chairmen of the Subcommittee on Agricultural Appropriations for over three decades. In comparison with other segregationist Mississippi Congressmen, particularly John Stennis and James O. Eastland, Whitten has been largely ignored in the histories

white political resistance during the civil rights era.\footnote{It bears mention that Eastland was also in a powerful position to shape the USDA. Eastland, a plantation owner from Sunflower County, was chair of the Subcommittee on Soil Conservation and Forestry. In fact, the Senate Agriculture Committee was almost entirely composed of southerners in the 1960s.: United States. (1998). The United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry 1825 – 1998. Available online at: \url{http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CDOC-105sdoc24}. Accessed 2/27/2013.} This is a consequential omission, since Whitten had a profound influence on United States agricultural policy. For several decades, Whitten leveraged the power of the purse in order to shape the trajectory of United States agriculture, and fought for the interests of the plantation-industrial complex in the South. I believe that it is a mistake to treat Whitten's racial politics and his role in determining agricultural policy as two separate positions. Through his influence, Whitten helped ensure that the racially exclusionary effects of the AAA would become further entrenched in United States Agriculture.\footnote{One lesson of the AAA—the federal government's willingness to support white supremacy in the name of the stability of agriculture—was certainly not lost on Whitten. In Whitten's early years as a lawyer in Tallahatchie county, he had the opportunity to survey the federal government's willingness to support the southern agricultural elite. Four decades later, in 1974, he played upon that complicity by invoking the historical importance of agriculture: “If you study the early 1930's, as I have, you'll see that the decline in agricultural purchasing power led to the depression, and everything else caved in on top of that. The farmer went under and everybody else caved in, too. It seems to me like these lessons have been forgotten and we are in danger of setting the thing in motion in an identical way (US House 1974, p. 286).”} In this chapter, will show how white supremacy translated into national agricultural policy; policy that shapes rural landscapes in the present day.

Whitten didn't just use his role to advance the material interests of an industrializing plantation agriculture. His agricultural politics were the manifestation of a violent disdain for the livelihoods and health of rural African Americans. As a Congressman from the Delta, Whitten helped to further embed plantation ideologies in national agricultural policy. And through that policy, Whitten played a role in creating
the injustices of the Delta's agro-industrial landscape in the present day. Nevertheless, Whitten was often given a free pass as a “reformed” racist in the final two decades of his congressional career. Whitten's *New York Times* obituary, for example, characterized him as "a son of the Old South who made a smooth transition to the New South".  

In this chapter, I seek to show that Whitten's transition was in fact “smooth” because his racial politics were manifested primarily through USDA policy, and that those politics were remarkably successful even during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the 1960s. Whitten effectively capitalized upon the USDA's emphasis on productivity and efficiency in order to shape national agricultural policy, and benefited tremendously from the essentialization of the “farmer” and nationalistic agricultural policies effected in the name of the consumer and US geopolitical dominance. Whitten fought against agricultural labor, passionately opposed any regulation of toxic agrochemicals, and in the process helped ensure a smooth transition from plantation agriculture to agro-industry. Plantation politics were particularly influential in shaping the structure of agriculture in the present day, and it is important to examine Jamie Whitten's role in shaping the environmental injustices of rural agricultural landscapes, especially in the Delta. In particular, I would like to draw attention to the ways in which Whitten mobilized threats—the threat of labor, the threat of pests, the threat of pollution, and the threat to US markets and geopolitical dominance—in order to advocate the racial agenda of agro-industry. Whitten took advantage of dominant discourses and polices that

---

privileged the consumer and idealized the farmer in order to pursue policies that intensified racial inequalities in agriculture.

II. Concealing Racial Exploitation, Glorifying the Farm

Jamie Whitten was a powerful proponent of an inverted picture of agriculture in which all that was good radiated from the large-scale farm. Considering his roots in the Delta, however, it shouldn't be particularly surprising that he privileged “the commercial farmers who really make for this standard of living we have, and on which the city people and all the small farmers you might say are dependent.”175 As I have endeavored to show in the preceding chapters, the dominance of plantation agriculture in the Delta was contingent upon the destruction of livelihoods and theexploitation of labor. Whitten was a product of this period of time in the Delta, and exhibited a racially-saturated disdain for small farmers and workers that we have already seen with Alfred H. Stone, the Delta Council, and the cotton section of the AAA.

At the level of congressional politics Whitten was particularly adroit at discursively erasing racial exploitation in agriculture, and pursuing racial politics without explicit reference to race. Though Whitten rarely made explicit references to race when in Washington, he was well-aware of the racial inequalities of Delta agriculture, and the ways in which the technologies of agricultural production were connected to race. In 1974, when speaking of the impact of boll weevils on “the local farmer”, he recalled that

“my father made two more bales of cotton or two less bales of cotton than he had mules. I think he had 30 or 40 mules, and that was the way you measured crops back then. It should have been from 10 to 15 bales per one-mule crop, as I recall it. So I have been through those periods. I know what can happen.”176 At times Whitten concealed racial exploitation—mules were hardly as indispensable as black workers to the functioning of his father's small plantation—while at other times speaking of “dependent” groups.

Whitten was remarkably effective at pursuing the interest of industrial agriculture through coded racial politics. In 1962—the year that Whitten urged fellow white Deltans to stand up against “integration and amalgamation”—his fellow subcommittee member William H. Natcher from Kentucky lauded his many accomplishments since he became chairman in 1950. Whitten had effectively supported a more-aggressive policy for selling US agricultural commodities to other countries, and championed the American cotton farmer on the international market. Mississippi’s share of federal agricultural appropriations for research had increased from $523,000 in 1950 to almost $3.5 million in 1962, and the appropriations for Stoneville had nearly tripled in Whitten's first 11 years as chairman of the agricultural appropriations subcommittee.177 At the same time, Natcher acknowledged the inability of these data to capture the full influence of Whitten, or the respect that members of Congress had for him:

All these are concrete and provable facts. What doesn't show perhaps is that the confidence the Members of Congress have in our chairman is a major factor in obtaining funds for agriculture and agricultural programs, so essential to farmers, but equally essential to the welfare of our 183 million Americans. The American farmer has never had a better friend than the chairman of this committee.\textsuperscript{178}

There was a great deal of truth in Natcher's praise. The USDA was a site in which southern white supremacy and federal politics found common cause in the development of industrial agriculture. Whitten could thus position himself as the champion of “the farmer,” who in turn guaranteed the standard of living enjoyed by the American consumer.

As agriculture became increasingly capital intensive, the cost of inputs such as tractors, combines, improved seeds and agrochemicals rose dramatically. As I have argued in previous chapters, this shift was both a product of racial exploitation and productive of new patterns of racial injustice within the context of the Delta. Whitten himself deployed the Stone and Willcox strategy of racial competition, but inequalities and heterogeneity within US agriculture were hidden by the idealization of the white American farmer, the mythical everyman of rural America (figure 4):

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., p. 260.
Figure 4, presented to Whitten's Subcommittee by Willard Cochrane, agricultural economist and adviser to the Kennedy administration, dramatically illustrates the cost-price squeeze in American agriculture. Cochrane was a self-proclaimed advocate for the family farm, but Whitten certainly expressed no opposition to the graph. In the aggregation of Cochrane's graph, the farm is privileged as the undifferentiated site of production, and lest we be mistaken about the nature of the collective American farmer, the imperiled producer is represented as a white man.

Whitten championed high-input, capital-intensive agriculture, so any concern he might have for rising production expenses would have a great deal of insincerity to it. Of course, Whitten was perfectly positioned to secure lines of credit and federal assistance for agro-industrializing white plantation owners. Perhaps he saw the graph as an

179 Ibid., p. 273.
indication of success in creating conditions hostile to the success of black farmers. The cost-price squeeze had strategic value in the South; it intensified the pressure on black farmers while providing planters with an argument against raising agricultural wages.

Whitten frequently identified labor and inefficiency as the two primary factors contributing to the cost-price squeeze in agriculture, and was rarely hesitant to share these views.

The graphic representation of the white farmer pressured by rising production costs—featured in every annual report of the Secretary of Agriculture for at least a decade—was more than acceptable to Whitten. He actively opposed any USDA attention to racial exploitation in the rural South with almost-unqualified success. For example, in 1946 Whitten aggressively asserted his will in subcommittee after getting his pugnacious hands on a newly-minted study entitled “A Cultural Reconnaissance of Coahoma County, Mississippi.” Among the offending sections of the report were an oblique reference to “racial injustice,” and a mention of unequal facilities in segregated schools.\(^{180}\) According to Whitten, these mentions of racial inequality were an affront to his region (or a threat to the power structure):

Mr. WHITTEN: Do you consider such reports as this in line with your duties and a proper use of Government funds?
Mr. TOLLEY: This is a part of the obtaining of facts.
Mr. WHITTEN: Facts for what purpose, Dr. Tolley? That is the point I make, that you can easily say what the purpose is if you have read and sent out these reports.
Mr. TOLLEY: It is to keep track of and to keep up to date on what is happening throughout the country with respect to these things.

Mr. WHITTEN: And the rest of the country, by that you mean the race questions, to raise the race question and to make it something of a problem; is that true?
Mr. TOLLEY: No; with respect to the matter of population and with respect to the matter of returning veterans, with respect to what use farmers make or will not make of their wartime savings, if any...
Mr. WHITTEN: Segregation all the way down and all the way up, that is the bigger part of it, is it not, this matter of socialization, race problems, and the things of that character.
Mr. TOLLEY: No.
Mr. WHITTEN: Shall we say only 45 percent instead of 50 percent?
Mr. TOLLEY: I think you will find it, sir, I think you will find it 3 or 5 percent.181

Whitten made it clear that even a “3 or 5 percent” attention to racial exploitation would be absolutely unacceptable, and Tolley quickly submitted, agreeing to withdraw the study. Like the Delta Council, Whitten was quick to territorialize the Delta as the unquestionable domain of planters, and like the Delta Council, he was usually successful. He would not countenance “vicious attacks on a county and its people”, and made it clear that a “public agricultural agency”, in his definition of the “public”, must support the interests of white supremacy in agriculture.182 Willard Cochrane seemed to respect this order of things when he entered Whitten's chamber in the 1960s, and it is difficult to even find a tepid mention of racial inequality in the USDA documents of the Kennedy administration.

Whitten was able to pursue the racial politics of agriculture at the national level effectively even—or perhaps especially—during the 1960s. Southern agricultural power inequalities were largely untouched by the USDA. Whitten's relationship with the

---

181 Ibid., pp. 235-236.
182 Ibid., p. 238.
Secretary of Agriculture was far more combative during the Eisenhower and Nixon administrations than it was during the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies. Orville Freeman's USDA was unwilling to tackle inequalities in landownership, ignored racial inequality, and depoliticized the struggle for rural livelihoods with the term “rural poverty.” Freeman's USDA found in Whitten an eager accomplice for nationalist agricultural policies, and was unwilling to jeopardize Whitten's support. When the Kennedy and Johnson administrations planned out national land uses, they provided no space for combating white supremacy in landownership (see Figure 5). Whitten, representing increasingly-industrialized plantation interests, was thus as much an accomplice as a foe.

Figure 5: The view from above

Whitten's positions were not entirely static. During the Eisenhower presidency, with Ezra Taft Benson as Secretary of Agriculture, Whitten occasionally took a relatively skeptical position on the doctrine of efficiency and the wisdom of technology-driven productivity increases. In 1955, for example, he argued to Benson's chief economist that "as you try to increase the farmer's efficiency, the cost of everything which he has to have to operate will cause costs to go up faster than his increased production."\footnote{United States. (1955). Department of Agriculture appropriations for 1956: Hearings before the subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, Eighty-fourth Congress, first session. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off. p. 452.} Whitten didn't demonize farmworkers in the hearing: “The farmworker seems to get lost in the rush. Looking at the fellow who works on the farm, he is also a farmer. So if it took two men to do the work and pressures get so great that the farmer has to use machinery and only one man, where does the other farm laborer go?”\footnote{Ibid., p. 451.}

Whitten's acknowledgment of the technology treadmill and reference to the plight of the farm worker are a far cry from his celebration of pesticides and opposition to farm labor in the next two decades. This is hardly to say that Whitten became a racist in the 1960s. Rather, it reflects the way in which the Delta plantation bloc responded to threats to the racial order—by intensifying the material, environmental and economic politics of agro-industrial development. There are three likely causes for the shift in Whitten's politics. Firstly, Whitten was cynically appropriating the plight of the farmworker in...
order to oppose Benson's USDA policy of reducing cotton acreage.\textsuperscript{186} Secondly, Whitten's district was consolidated in 1962, increasing the portion of his constituency within the Delta.\textsuperscript{187} Whitten took advantage of the relatively-moderate position of his principle opponent, establishing himself as both more racist and better-positioned to secure agricultural funding.\textsuperscript{188} Finally, and most importantly, the intensification of the politics of agro-industry was a response to the growing resistance of the black freedom struggles in the Delta (this will be the focus of Chapter 5).

The remainder of this chapter I will focus primarily on the purportedly race-neutral mobilization of agro-industry against threats. I am interested in Whitten's role in national agricultural politics—both how he fit in and how he shaped the trajectory of agriculture. Before we proceed, it is important to note point out that, on the national stage, Whitten had scrubbed his rhetoric of almost any explicit mention of race by 1960. His politics were increasingly violent and vitriolic, however, as he identified no shortage of threats and solutions that would serve the interests of an agro-industrializing plantation bloc. This was the new racial politics of southern agriculture—thoroughly rooted in Delta plantation politics yet palatable to the USDA of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson.

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., p. 1230. Benson's USDA policies (and Whitten's brief loss of the chairmanship) would so traumatize him that he was still frequently bringing up Benson as the scourge of the farmer a full 15 years later.
\textsuperscript{188} Time limitations, limited archival access and the relative lack of historical attention to Whitten's career have limited my ability to substantively engage with Whitten's agri-political shift in the late 50s and early 60s. In future research, I hope to flesh out the details of this shift, which will likely be of great relevance to my broader project and theoretical framing. For now, I can only present these three shifts as working theories.
III. The Threat of Labor

Even before Whitten rose to the chairmanship of the Subcommittee on Agricultural Appropriations, he was a vocal proponent of a planter's right to pay workers next-to-nothing. In 1945, speaking of the need for federal intervention against the demands of agricultural labor, he declared that “a reasonable wage ceiling would probably be most helpful because many cotton pickers are of the type who, when they hear of higher wages payed somewhere else, they spend half their time going from place so that they, in turn, do not make as much money and the producer does not get as much cotton picked.”

Beyond the thinly-veiled implicit racism of Whitten's typology of cotton pickers, the claim that a wage ceiling would increase worker income is just as ludicrous as the Delta Council's charge that plantation relations were characterized by “mutual effort.” Firmly rooted in the same racial politics of Alfred Holt Stone and the Delta Council, Whitten was committed to maintaining a balance of power that decisively favored the planter.

To this end, Whitten consistently portrayed American agriculture as the victim of agricultural labor. In Whitten's metaphysics, the large-scale farm was productive of all value, and was, in his account, under assault by labor and the increasing urbanization of

---

America's population. Whitten urged that the members of Congress representing urban districts needed to acknowledge “that the 5.6 percent of our folks who have huge investments, risk, and hard work free the other 94.4 percent to do all these things which contribute to our higher standard of living.”

Apart from moments of political expediency, Whitten maintained this focus on the large-scale farm as the site bearing the burden of risks in agriculture, and painted organized labor—whether on the farm or in urban industry—as the aggressor victimizing the large-scale farmer or the glutton demanding an increasing portion of the consumer dollar. Whitten bemoaned the increasingly-difficult challenge of securing agricultural labor, since “as long as the average American has something to eat and wear it is impossible to get him to do this kind of backbreaking, bending over all day, tedious job.” Unsurprisingly, Whitten failed to mention that agricultural workers in the Delta states of Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi received less than a third of the average

---

190 The racial paranoia implicit in Whitten's perception of the threat of urbanization is beyond the purview of this thesis, but calls for future research. To be certain, the planters weren't terribly happy about the shifts in political power that accompanied the migration of southern blacks to urban industrial centers. In Whitten's own words: “...with all these folks moving to the city and the Supreme Court giving them all the Congressmen, we are going to be in bad shape (US House 1969, p. 315).”


wage received nationally by workers in manufacturing. To the extent that farmworkers were able to exercise their freedom to turn down the “tedious job”, he lamented, the “man who suffers is not just the man who owns the land and fruit and vegetables that go to waste; it is the American consumer all the way to New York City.”

Labor's mobility was one threat, but it paled in comparison to the specter of labor organization and the threat of rising wages. In the 1962 election, Whitten attacked his opponent Frank E. Smith for supporting a federally-funded program that trained tractor drivers in the Delta, most of whom were black. In the campaign, Whitten lambasted Smith as a moderate unfaithful to the “Southern Majority”. In Congress, Whitten charged that the tractor-driver training was a program for the “so-called unemployed” that could “serve as a wedge for the bringing together of labor organizations.” There seems to be no evidence that this was the plan, and the tractor drivers were being payed a mere $28 a week for participating in the program, but Whitten's anti-labor politics had reached a feverishly vitriolic height. Whether he was opposing labor rights or cynically invoking the plight of the farmworker, one argument was always at the center—the only way to advance the well-being of agricultural workers was to ensure the competitiveness of cotton and the health of national agriculture. Whitten never missed an opportunity to

194 *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1966*, p. 16.
197 Ibid., p. 78.
claim that acreage reductions and diminished federal support for cotton had forced tenants and sharecroppers from the land. In Whitten's portrayal, if sharecroppers and tenants were neither passive nor indolent, they were likely communist. Any government program, then, that might threaten inequalities in southern agriculture was unforgivable. The same applied to international agricultural policy.

IV. Food as a Weapon: White Supremacy and Agricultural Nationalism.

During World War II, agriculture was in many ways militarized as the federal government encouraged technology-driven productivity. “Food is thus the source of military strength,” the Secretary of Agriculture wrote in 1943, “the raw material both of fighting power and of weapons.” These symbolic and structural shifts in wartime agriculture had a profound effect on agriculture that lasted beyond the war—the 1945 report, released after WWII ended, was titled “Our Food as a Weapon of War.” In the report, the new Secretary of Agriculture, Clinton Anderson, pointed to the need to harness the increasing productivity of agriculture: “There is one clear lesson. We must abandon the old defensive economy and make an aggressive coordinated attack on scarcity, so that the production-capacities of agriculture and of industry can be continuously and fully employed.” Anderson, emboldened by allied victory and giddy with the thrill of mushrooming productivity, announced a new era of higher yields and a new role of American agriculture in the world economy. The Marshall Plan, unveiled first to the

Delta Council (as mentioned in chapter 3), positioned American agriculture as the vanguard of world peace and plenty. Of course, expanded productivity called for expanded consumption, a requirement that was not lost to the Department of Agriculture:

Paradoxically we must find ways to use our abundance, in order to have abundance in the future. The short way to become a have-not nation is let consumption go down and surpluses pile up...We have an opportunity to use our resources without misusing them, and to produce an adequate supply of what the people want by means that help to assure plentiful resources for the future. A policy of abundance is immensely practical and no practical alternatives exist.200

By 1949, though, agricultural surpluses were once again threatening the profitability of American agriculture. The Marshall Plan was intended to rebuild Europe as an ally, and as European agricultural production increased, US exports to Europe fell. The USDA prognosticated that “we probably cannot maintain our exports at current levels. When our foreign-aid programs end and foreign agriculture recover fully, the problem may be acute.”201 The escalating productivism of US agriculture required a new threat—something to mobilize against, and markets to conquer.

Jamie Whitten certainly yearned for this threat. He eagerly announced a “world price war” in cotton, but was unhappy with what he saw as insufficient support of cotton in the postwar period.202 The per-acre productivity emphasized by the USDA and happily adopted by planters threatened the profitability of cotton through overaccumulation—there simply weren't enough consumers for US cotton. The price

---

supports and acreage allotments provided by the government were politically tenuous, and a new mobilization was needed in order to sustain the regional interests of the cotton-plantation bloc. Whitten wanted export subsidies that would guarantee US cotton's ability to undercut competition, and vigorously pursued them year after year through his subcommittee. Whitten argued that as long as the higher cost of production wasn't an issue, “if we can produce cotton to a greater extent than any other part of the world due to the mechanization, due to our experience, due to the fertility of the soil, due to the desirability of the climate, due to the experience of those who are planting the cotton, and all of the factors which enter into it; if we could produce more than any other part of the world, how would we suffer in any price war in world price of cotton?”

The militant productivism championed by Jamie Whitten and the USDA found an outlet and an enemy in the perceived (and constructed) threat of global communism. Europe was a sometimes-begrudged ally, but the stated goal of the Marshall Plan to rebuild the productive capacity of European nations hardly allowed for the militant approach to foreign markets necessary to absorb growing agricultural surpluses. White supremacist agricultural policy found its global Other in the racialized threat of Third World communism—a threat that Whitten was quick to exploit, waving the cotton banner of southern agricultural nationalism. Soon, war in the Korean Peninsula would strengthen Whitten's hand.

In Truman's declaration of economic mobilization for the Korean War, he urged all of the nation to pursue the “common good” against “Communist imperialism”:

---

203 Ibid., p. 348.
Whereas world conquest by Communist imperialism is the goal of the forces of aggression that have been loosed upon the world; and
Whereas, if the goal of Communist imperialism were to be achieved, the people of this country would no longer enjoy the full and rich life they have with God's help built for themselves and their children...
I summon our farmers, our workers in industry, and our businessmen to make a mighty production effort to meet the defense requirements of the Nation and to this end eliminate all waste and inefficiency and to subordinate all lesser interests to the common good.\textsuperscript{204}

This mobilization extended the regimented productivism of World War II agriculture, guaranteeing capital to planters in the South, and further supporting the white supremacist project of technological homogenization of agriculture in the name of the health of the Nation. To return to the concept of the “esprit de corps” of agriculture invoked by the Delta Council's Read Dunn in 1940, this military term refers to the confidence of a body of troops in their commander. It was a powerful phrase to invoke; whitening and homogenizing Delta agriculture while calling for the harmonization of southern white supremacist interests and national agricultural policy. This was the racial politics of regimented agriculture that Whitten cut his teeth on, and the Cold War provided afforded him tremendous national traction in leading the Delta plantation regiment against racial threats both foreign and domestic.

Sociologist Percy Hintzen (1995) identifies European conceptions of national interest as a key white supremacist foundation of US foreign policy:

If the very institutions and culture of the world outside the West, i.e., of 'primitive' people, become threatening, Europeans need to develop collective institutions to prevent incursion of these non-European peoples, their ways of

life, their ideas and values, their institutions, and even the contaminating effects of their genes. This is the fundamental idea embodied in the principle of protection of national interests, a cornerstone of the foreign policies of Western nations as they relate to the world outside of the North Atlantic.205

Hintzen points to the “notion of unilinear developmentalism” as a manifestation through foreign aid of “noblesse oblige”—a “civilizing” mission. Together, Hintzen argues, competitive national interest and noblesse oblige form the “twin foundations of foreign policy”. Both pillars were operative in the formation of the post-war food regime, but Whitten consistently strove to shift foreign policy in the direction of militant, state-subsidized agricultural competition. Whether or not Whitten read Alfred H. Stone's *Studies in the American Race Problem*, he certainly ascribed to Stone's brand of plantation epistemology. Stone's violent text proclaimed that “This life of ours is, and is likely always to remain, a ceaseless struggle for supremacy among nations, and races, and individuals,”206 and that the 20th century battle would “be fought out in the open field, under the sun and upon the soil—where the world may look on.”207

With the emergent postwar agricultural regime, southern white supremacy became increasingly dependent upon international agricultural imperialism. The concentrated structure of land tenure of Delta—and even the very feasibility of cotton—was increasingly dependent upon government price supports, and benefited tremendously from the emphasis on efficiency and competition after World War II. Whitten exerted his influence to shift foreign food and agricultural policy towards economic violence at every

---

207 Ibid., p. 266.
opportunity; power, profit and ownership in the Delta were at stake in foreign policy decisions.

It is evident that Whitten saw a tight connection between international policy and the power structure in the Delta. In 1946 Whitten accused the head of the USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics of promoting an “internationalized viewpoint.” To Whitten, this competed with his own vision of a “price war” that would leverage American productive capacity against foreign markets, undercutting other cotton producers with US subsidies. Whitten's position on trade was not entirely oppositional, but he charged that:

You and a whole lot of the people down there in the Department of Agriculture and in the State Department in that whole set-up, want to remake and rework our international relations on some of these things, you want to rework and reorganize agriculture on an international basis. It seems inevitably at the expense of the American farmer. Do you not spend a good deal of your time making your analyses and your interpretations from the standpoint of the change of the economic set-up of the farm areas and the changing of the entire areas, and the handling of agricultural products, and have you not given a lot of your social ideas to these plans, and have you not gotten, inevitably, your social ideas mixed up with your facts?208

The international order of trade as competition/warfare and the domestic order of landownership, racial exploitation and profit were one and the same to Whitten. It was at this precise point in the 1946 hearings that Whitten chose to attack the Coahoma County study, evidencing the tight connection between the two subjects in Whitten's political strategy of control and conquer.

If the Bureau of Agricultural Economics had, as Whitten charged, mixed their “social ideas” with “their facts”, they were unwilling to directly challenge Whitten's

---

“social idea” of white supremacy, so seamlessly integrated with the control and deployment of “the facts.” In this way, the racist underpinnings of American foreign policy in food and agriculture were profoundly shaped by southern white supremacy.

Whitten and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics could, after all, agree on the fundamental superiority of the American farmer and had as a common goal the supremacy of American agriculture. The proponents of a more liberal and subtle racial order were unwilling to confront their vitriolic compatriot from the Delta. Whitten would later remind his own constituency that “integration and amalgamation...leads down the road to ruin,” and that the heritage of the Nation was being destroyed by “our efforts to get along with all the nations of the world, all these small weaklings with whom we formed a partnership.”

In reading transcripts of the Subcommittee for Agricultural Appropriations, I have come to the realization that agrarian nationalism has frequently served to harmonize commodity groups, interest groups or political groups that were otherwise in contradiction. As sociologist William Winders' recent (2009) scholarship has explored the conflicted development of agricultural policy as the product of often-oppositional commodity interests. The corn, wheat and cotton blocs—just to name a few crops—have often found themselves at odds over national agricultural policies. There is no shortage of illustrations of the interface between southern white supremacy and militant agricultural nationalism, however, in the Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee

---


hearings. Take the 1966 testimony of Ron Kennedy, the Minnesota representative of the (wheat flour) Millers' National Federation. He distills Vietnam-era nationalism, militant fear of pests, and agricultural productivism into a potent concoction, which Whitten was happy to imbibe:

KENNEDY: It has become a cliché for the United States to boast of its scientific agriculture. For the first time in history, man has found a way to defeat his most ancient enemy, hunger. Our method has worked so well that you gentlemen have had to deal with massive programs for utilization of our abundance...

We have reached the point in world affairs where the major legislation before you is Food for Freedom—a recognition of our No. 1 peaceful weapon—the food produced in abundance by a tiny fraction of our populace operating our commercial family farms...

The average person might easily miss the significance of the fact that [the Government's “Wheat Situation” report] does not need to contain a single sentence of reference to the triumph of science which makes a two-plus-billion-bushel supply of wheat possible.

I am sure, however, that if the philosophy of this new budget proposal were to go uncorrected, the wheat situation reports of the future would be quite different.

They would be full of references to rust epidemics, viruses, and other plant diseases, to sawfly and hessian fly and other insect enemies of wheat, to the hazards of drought and heat and winter kill, to the hazards of drought and heat and winter kill, to the problems of completely unsuitable varieties and types of wheat—in other words, to the ancient enemies of man's food supply and all their modern hybridized descendants...

We do not have a 'surplus' of wheat. Far from it. Our eminence in fruitful production is like a Green Beret outpost in Vietnam—eternal vigilance is the price of holding it...

WHITTEN: The fight against disease continues year after year. I think you will find that this subcommittee is sympathetic to the points you have made...

KENNEDY: If we can keep the scientific agriculture going, we don't have to worry about the social problems.

WHITTEN: That is right. Thank you a whole lot.211

Whitten was positioned to mold jingoism into the form most amenable to white control of agriculture in the South, and in the process shaped national policy in the direction of multi-scalar violence. Kennedy's assertion that “scientific agriculture” would inevitably take care of “social problems” certainly had a great deal of resonance with Whitten, whose driving concern was securing “equality for agriculture.” The connection that Kennedy draws between pests and social enemies, and between agricultural productivity and military vigilance provides a fitting prelude for the section that follows. Be it the threat of Vietnamese communism or the threat of black independence in the Delta, challenges to white supremacy and US domination animated the violent politics of agrochemicals.

V. “That We May Live”: Pesticides and Environmental Injustice

The militarization of the agricultural economy during and after World War II certainly had the effect of boosting surpluses through per-acre productivity increases. These changes further consolidated agricultural power in the Delta, while contributing to the tremendous agricultural surpluses that were disposed through mechanisms designed to consolidate international agricultural power. Many of the technologies of this agricultural productivism, moreover, were technologies of war in their own right. As I have mentioned, organochlorides were developed in Germany as chemical weapons for use against humans, and their commercial production as insecticides would come later.

In 1947, Secretary of Agriculture Anderson heralded the “War on Harmful
Insects.” This was not the first widespread use of pesticides—calcium arsenate had been extensively deployed against the boll weevil in previous decades, for example—but the postwar years marked a tremendous increase in the volume and types of pesticides used. Whitten would soon insert himself as one of the most strident defenders of the expanding war on weeds and pests. In Mississippi, the use of agrochemicals to increase yields was enthusiastically promoted by agricultural researchers and the extension service. A 1949 release by the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service details the Cotton Improvement Program, sponsored by a variety of agribusiness interests and the Delta Council. The program was conceived “as an incentive to cotton farmers to demonstrate all the known research in cotton production.” The document urges that “We must produce cotton cheaper per pound of lint, if we expect to meet competition of cotton producing areas...Use of more labor saving devices must be taken advantage of. This trend in farm labor prices has had a tendency to cause farmers to mechanize their cotton production as much as possible.” In addition to interregional competition and the rising cost of labor, a third threat is identified: “Cotton insects destroy one-fourth to three-fourths of a bale per acre on most Mississippi farms. This means a loss of from $25 to $50 an acre from cotton insects.” The document goes on to demonstrate a significant positive correlation between fertilizer used per acre, “number of poisonings” (poisons unspecified) and total

214 Ibid., p. 4.
215 Ibid., p. 7.
yield of lint per acre. The implication is clear: replace labor with technology, fertilize heavily, use the best seeds (Deltapine, naturally), and poison frequently.

The international competition that Whitten so zealously advocated was the means to dispense of the surpluses of induced regional competition. This competition served to benefit the agribusiness sponsors of the program and the largest, most connected white farmers. Agrochemicals were presented as allies in the war against the boll weevil and competitors, and labor was an increasingly untenable cost. Revealingly, there is no indication that the labor “cost” is indeed human, or that the poisons—unambiguously necessary for increased yields—would cohabitate the fields with workers, exacting a toll upon bodies and health.

Is it surprising, then, that Whitten became an enthusiastic defender of agrochemicals? Whitten's trenchant praise of pesticides was in keeping with his glorification of the essentialized farm, his frequent assertions that agriculture was a victim of sectoral discrimination, and his articulation of racial politics around threats to the success of agriculture. Insects, in Whitten's estimation, were the greatest threat humanity had ever faced. Progress, then, was contingent upon their wholesale destruction. In 1966, Whitten released That We May Live, an ode to pesticides and a diatribe against their detractors. It is no coincidence that Whitten released this book when he did—both pesticides and plantation politics were facing tremendous challenge, and the two had become inseparably linked in the political and material project of the agro-industrial interests that Whitten represented. The “We” of That We May Live, I argue, is none other than the survival of white supremacy in agriculture.
That We May Live, Whitten began, “is the result of a long-standing concern over unjustified public fears over those invaluable chemicals called pesticides.”\(^{216}\) In his account, the book was a response to the “big public scare” over pesticides following Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and stemmed from his “awareness of the dangers that public fear has for agriculture.”\(^{217}\) Whitten was resolved to communicate his “conviction that pesticides are now an absolute necessity to our way of life...to the American public before serious harm is done.”\(^{218}\) As I have argued, United States agriculture was pushed into a state of perpetual mobilization following World War II, a mobilization supported by and supportive of white supremacist control in Delta agriculture. Homogenization of the farm in the name of productivity and efficiency was a means of neutralizing threats to racial control and consolidating white ownership of land. Therefore, when Whitten invokes “the constant fight against insects and disease, pests and pestilence,” he articulates a manifestation of white supremacy encouraged at the level of national policy while expressing the same racial paranoia that was more directly targeted at the black population within the Delta.\(^{219}\)

Whitten's version of risk—the risk of regulation, political opposition, and the demands of labor—is borne by agriculture, which enables the way of life enjoyed by the American consumer. It is a risk to pesticides, a risk to the farm, and a risk to a way of life. In this remarkable inversion, the risk of these toxins to the workers who apply them and the people who live in close proximity to fields is summarily dismissed. Whitten


\(^{217}\) Ibid., p. vi.

\(^{218}\) Ibid., p. vii.

\(^{219}\) Ibid., p. vii.
lists a multitude of benefits that “man” has received from the invention of pesticides, fungicides and herbicides:

- “After thousands of years of warfare, there appears at last to be a weapon to lay low one of man's most formidable enemies, the rat.”
- “Public health workers the world over have used them to fight the most dreaded scourges of humankind.”
- “Today the American housewife can enter a supermarket and buy food for her family's dinner that is higher in quality than could have been imagined thirty years ago.”
- “Wildlife populations all over the nation are bigger and healthier than ever, not in spite of pesticides, but in many cases because of them.”

But a profoundly depoliticized version of the agrarian change that has been the focus of preceding chapters saturates Whitten's book. He speaks of his hometown in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, in a passage that bears quoting extensively:

And now, changes have come to my village. The open fire no longer exists. Heat now comes from gas or oil burners. Though everyone has electric lights, the youngsters seldom read more than is required by the teachers; the temptation to watch and listen to television is too great. The farm bell is no more. Most of the 'hands' have left the farm and now work in factories in town, making radio and television sets, providing electricity and butane gas, manufacturing refrigerators and other conveniences that add to the comfort of life. The few tractor drivers left on the farm need no bell; for they, like the rest of us, wear wrist watches... My village is one in which many people would like to live; but neither I nor they would not want those who have been released from the farm by labor-saving chemicals, machinery, and electricity, who have moved to the city to provide telephones, automobiles, television sets, and other consumer goods, to have to return and dig in the ground to grow food. I would much better remember those 'good old days' while watching television in a modern home, than go back to them with their reduced standard of living.

220 Ibid., p. 30.
221 Ibid., p. 45.
222 Ibid., p. 51.
223 Ibid., p. 111.
224 Ibid., p. 135.
Whitten was responding to Rachel Carson's invocation of natural beauty destroyed by chemicals in *Silent Spring*, and his account of the “changes” in his village contrasts a former life of toil with the conveniences of the present day. It is worth emphasizing the passive role he ascribes to “the hands”—they were formerly tied to the land, but have now been “released” to “provide” all of the “conveniences that add to the comfort of life.” Though Whitten was often given free reign in Congress to invoke the convenience of the consumer and the welfare of the farm, his representation of his “village” was a far cry from the social reality of those who lived there.

To begin—and perhaps to state the obvious—the village (be it Whitten's hometown of Cascilla or the state of Mississippi at large) was a place of tremendous racial inequality and brutal political control. Although Whitten declared in 1957 that “we do not, as a matter of law, do anything for the purpose of disenfranchising people and no mention of color or race appears in law,” the racial boundaries of political participation were zealously policed. The 7,982 votes Whitten received for his 1958 Congressional bid represented 6% of the 2nd district's adult residents. Any challenge to all-white juries and the exclusion of blacks from elections were, in Whitten's words, efforts “to stir up a lot of agitation.”

Moreover, withholding the things that “add to the comfort of life”—in particular, the most essential items—was a political tactic for Whitten. In Whitten's home county of

---

Tallahatchie, 77.8% of families were below the federal poverty line, and 38.8% participated in federal food programs. Whitten, however, was a stalwart opponent of the very food programs that helped people survive the changes in the agrarian economy he had, with unflagging dedication, supported. He fought to ensure that food stamps would cost money—an effective means of keeping them from the poorest and hungriest—while invoking the threat of “organized groups” who advocated for free food aid. To Secretary Freeman, he whined that “This is one of the things you always run into. You make food stamps available at 30 percent discount; then they want them at 50, then 75. Now, I have heard reports that some of the organized minority groups are insisting that they be provided free of charge. When you start giving people something for nothing, just giving them all they want for nothing, I wonder if you don't destroy character more than you might improve nutrition.”

This was Whitten's village, “liberated” for the convenience of the American consuming public. I highlight the social and material context because it is the regional reality informing Whitten's defense of pesticides, which has shaped the unequal distribution of risk in the present day. Whitten's advocacy of agrochemicals represented a continuation of a number of the historical characteristics of the racial agricultural state that I have outlined so far: technical fixes were deployed as a response against challenges to racial control, militaristic nationalism provided a connective discourse between regional and national solutions, a capital-intensive and productivist approach to agrarian

---


113
change was prescribed, the “farmer” and the consumer were the privileged subjects of this change, and benefit from these programs was distributed unevenly.

Of even greater consequence, however, was the unequal distribution of risk. Whitten's greatest efforts were expended in shielding southern agriculture from substantial regulation of agrochemicals, and guarded against any damning attention to the effects of agrochemicals on workers. In this regard, the dominant thread of national environmentalism failed to challenge the exploitative pillars of Delta agro-industry, instead privileging consumers or a depopulated imaginary of pristine nature under siege. Even Rachel Carson's paradigm shifting book—which is more balanced than many environmentalist texts of the time—devotes far more attention to birds, fish, bees, forests, streams and and urban consumers than to the rural people and agricultural laborers who were most directly affected by agro-toxins. Environmentalists—including Carson—competed with the interests of agro-industry for the attention of the implicitly-white consumers of natural beauty and agricultural bounty.

Whitten and the Delta's white elite were more than able to rally under the banner of conservation, so long as it didn't threaten the profitability of agriculture. Conservation of the “sportsman's” way of life was a preoccupation of many members of the Delta's plantation elite long before pesticides were thrust into the national spotlight. Conservation was conservation by whites and for whites, a social fact naturalized by administrators—black Mississippian were completely excluded, for example, from the
state parks. National attention to wildlife and wilderness was acceptable as long as it didn't threaten the power and profit of agro-industry. The most fundamentally threatening emphasis—the health impacts of agrochemicals to workers—was territory zealously guarded by Whitten, who welcomed the secondary status it was afforded behind the wellbeing of wildlife and the health of the consumer. The romanticism of the national discourse on wildlife and nature is the ace up Whitten's sleeve. To this romanticism, he countered that agriculture itself was not purely natural, since:

…man departed from natural processes when he domesticated his first animal and later when he first planted a seed. Though racked by disease and doubtless plagued by lice, primitive man changed the balance of nature even more when he cultivated plants or crops. Crops, if they can be called crops at all, grew in limited quantities in scattered areas. When he undertook to plant entire fields in a single crop man altered the natural environment and created an artificial one. One can realize how artificial by driving through corn or wheat country, where vast fields of one densely growing crop are seen mile after mile. Even a pasture planted in grass is highly artificial. Producing crops as we do today creates a condition that often leads to the explosive spread of an insect or a plant disease. But only through intensive agriculture can a rural population that is less than 8 percent of the nation's total population feed everyone, and only through enormous production can their ever be hope of feeding the world's rapidly expanding population.

Whitten's argument is, in fact, part of one continuum of environmental discourse. On one hand, there is a pristine nature that we should return to. On the other, there was a natural state, we have departed from it, and this departure defines progress. Absent an outcry against the multiple levels of social injustice sustaining these “fields in a single crop,” Whitten's book entered a debate ordered around the unacknowledged axes of

---


231 Whitten 1966., pp. 16-17.
possessive and consumptive whiteness. Thus, Carson's "vast web of life, all of which needs to be taken into account" failed to challenge the unequal distribution of risk.\textsuperscript{232}

By 1966, when Whitten released \textit{That We May Live}, the Delta was hardly suffering from a shortage of agrochemicals. Cotton acreage in the United States treated with herbicides increased from 7\% in 1958 to 52\% in 1966.\textsuperscript{233} In the Delta—remember the Stoneville preoccupation with the labor "bottleneck"—almost all cotton was treated with herbicides by 1966.\textsuperscript{234} In the Delta states, there was a strong relationship between the scale of the farm and the use of agrochemicals. Farms with sales of more than $40,000 a year were over 6 times more likely to use herbicides than farms with sales under $2,500.\textsuperscript{235} Insecticides, moreover, were used on 80\% of cotton acres in the Delta states, and in the Delta itself this percentage was likely significantly higher.\textsuperscript{236} Harvesting cotton with a mechanical cotton picker—by the mid-1960s mechanical pickers were widely used in the Delta—required a liberal dousing of chemical defoliants.

In the interest of brevity, I can only pay limited attention to the toxicology of these chemicals saturating the lived version of Whitten's village, but I will mention a few.\textsuperscript{237}

\textbf{2,4-D and 2,4,5-T:} 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T were used as defoliants and herbicides, and were the active ingredients in Agent Orange. The widespread use of Agent Orange in Vietnam

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{234} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{235} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 11.
\item \textsuperscript{236} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 14. The Delta was characterized by the most capital-intensive farms in the Southeast, and these large-scale farms were significantly more likely to use pesticides.
\item \textsuperscript{237} Because of archival limitations, I have chosen to use farm extension recommendations as proxies for the chemicals that were actually applied in the Delta. The limitations of this approach are obvious, and this topic calls for far more robust research at the PhD level.
\end{itemize}
caused a massive increase in cancer rates and birth defects in the Vietnamese countryside.\textsuperscript{238} These chemicals come from the group of polychlorinated phenolic compounds that were first developed by United States researchers for chemical warfare purposes, but were soon deployed as agricultural chemicals.\textsuperscript{239} Dioxin is a toxic byproduct of 2,4,5-T production, and the amount of dioxin in 2,4,5-T affects the toxicity of the compound.\textsuperscript{240}

**DDT:** DDT is both acutely toxic and carcinogenic to animals and humans. It is a persistent pollutant, taking a significant period of time to break down in the environment. It is also a bioaccumulant, and can concentrate in the tissues of animals as it moves through the food chain.\textsuperscript{241} DDT was the primary target of *Silent Spring*, and the rallying point for environmental regulation in the 1960s and early 1970s.

**Parathion:** Parathion is a highly-toxic organophosphate insecticide, derived from the family of synthetic toxins developed in Germany and used during World War II. Symptoms include headaches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, tremors, muscle weakness and depression. Chronic exposure can cause neurological impairment. Severe poisoning (requiring only minimal ingestion or exposure to skin) can lead to convulsion, cardiac arrest and death.\textsuperscript{242} Organophosphate insecticides break down more quickly in the

\begin{footnotes}


\textsuperscript{240} Zierler (2011). p. 105.

\textsuperscript{241} United States. (1975). *DDT, a review of scientific and economic aspects of the decision to ban its use as a pesticide*. Washington, D.C: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

\end{footnotes}
environment than do chlorinated hydrocarbons like DDT. The risk faced by farmworkers and farmers relative to the risk faced by consumers and wildlife is significantly higher.

VI. Poisonous Roots

These are but a few of the chemicals that were deployed against the pest, weeds and workers of the Delta, and that were defended by Whitten. The institutional and economic appeal of agrochemicals had taken on a life of its own. Developed and deployed by the productivist agricultural state, they were the material means of “rendering technical” the many problems of the exploitative plantation monoculture. Agrochemicals and plantation agriculture, in fact, created the very problems that the research state positioned itself to fix. At the turn of the 20th century, Stoneville was born of planter obsession (exemplified by A.H. Stone) with control and consolidation of Delta agriculture, achieved through the manipulation of technology. The solution provided for the social and environmental destructiveness of these technologies was always the further consolidation of power and the development of new technologies. Warnings were always there, however, to be ignored by the plantation elite.

Rather than recognizing the mobility of black workers as an indictment and resistance against the unsustainable brutality of plantation agriculture, Stone used it as evidence of black inferiority. The destructiveness of the boll weevil, moreover, was intensified by the technical responses to the weevil. Entomologists were well that beneficial insects preyed upon the boll weevil. In 1912, for example, the USDA released a publication entitled *The Insect Enemies of the Boll Weevil*, detailing no fewer than 26
species of predators and 29 species of parasites that attacked the weevil. Rather than a measured response to the weevil or an attempt to transform the plantation economy, Stone and Stoneville prescribed more exploitation of labor, improved seeds, further homogenization of cotton production, and liberal application of calcium arsenate by workers.

Calcium arsenate, in addition to poisoning the boll weevil and workers, killed a number of the parasites and predators that provided a limited check to the weevil. Calcium arsenate was an effective poison of insects and people, but its usage failed to eradicate the boll weevil. In the years immediately following World War II, many growers switched to DDT. A 1945 Mississippi Farm Research bulletin cautions that DDT:

…may limit its usefulness because of the danger of killing bees and many other beneficial insects which are absolutely necessary for the pollination of orchard, garden and field crops. Furthermore, the general use of DDT would destroy many of the predacious and parasitic insects which render great service to farmers in helping to control important pests. In addition, it is not yet fully known just what will be the effect on man and domestic animals of consuming DDT in food materials over a long period of time.

Subsequent years of Mississippi Farm Research, however, seem to indicate that this caution was thrown to the increasingly-toxic wind. By the mid-1950s, boll weevils had developed a resistance to Whitten's “once-in-the-history-of-the-world chemical DDT.”

---

and organochlorides were added to the prescribed chemical regimen. This paved the way for the cotton bollworm by removing competitors and predators. The bollworm was targeted with DDT, but it also soon developed a resistance.\(^{246}\)

By 1958, agrochemicals were applied to over 15 million acres in the Delta states, and by the early sixties 167 million pounds of DDT, 16 million pounds of methyl parathion, and 18 million pounds of 2,4,5-T were produced in the United States. The tepid caution that the effects of DDT on humans were unknown was replaced by a new caution. If research publications are any indication, the Delta station's primary preoccupation was the toxicity of agrochemicals to commodity crops. Though apparently unconcerned with human toxicity, researchers at Stoneville examined the effects of “interactions of chemicals on cotton” in 1965.\(^{247}\) Stoneville researchers were also preoccupied with “cotton injury” caused by the application of herbicides and insecticides, but there seems is no indication that rigorous studies were undertaken on the effects of these poisons to the people who worked in and lived near the fields.\(^{248}\) Had these studies been conducted, Whitten would have likely suppressed them. In addition to writing pro-pesticidal texts, though, he leveraged his control of appropriations in order to direct the development of chemicals and the studies done on these chemicals. Whitten was given to threatening programs and individuals with funding cuts if they didn't toe his line, and in

this way directed policy as well as funding.\textsuperscript{249} As one bureaucrat would later recall, “going to Whitten was like going to see the king, and you had better remember who was king.”\textsuperscript{250}

Whitten's multiplication of power through targeted appropriations at the national level mirrored the treadmill of industrial agriculture, in which Whitten and Stoneville both played a part. Chemical weed and insect control was most advantageous to those farms which were most mechanized. This set of agricultural practices was most attainable to large-scale white farmers, who were far more likely to have the capital or the access to credit so-often denied to black farmers. Meanwhile, the tests on the toxicity of herbicides to plants were performed with the varieties selected by Stoneville, including but not limited to Deltapine cotton varieties. “Unimproved cotton”, then, was less likely to be adapted to the chemical regimens promoted by Delta extension agents as best practice. It is clear from the preponderance of studies from the Delta Research Station that Stoneville was in the service of large-scale, commodity crop agriculture. The Delta would be a place where cotton—and increasingly rice, soybeans and corn—was still grown, and where chemicals replaced labor to the greatest extent possible. This process of mechanization and chemical intensification wasn't instant, however, and weeds developed resistances.

The very-intentional escalation of chemical-intensive agriculture in the Delta went hand in hand with Whitten's tautological assertion that “producing crops as we do today” required an abundance of chemicals. This path of production was used as its own justification, but this was only possible because of a callous disregard for human life. Workers were still required in the very fields sprayed with the chemicals targeted at a multitude of unwanted organisms. In this way, pesticides were an ideal technology for the multi-scalar white supremacist violence of industrializing agriculture. The technological fixes of white supremacy in the Delta were translated into USDA policy by Whitten and others, who secured funding for a specific direction of agricultural research even as they opposed racial justice. The 1966 resolution of the Mississippi Senate commending Orville Freeman and the USDA fire ant eradication program echoes the militant language of massive resistance to civil rights—even as those same politicians were deploRING Federal interference with “state sovereignty”:

Whereas the legislatures of the States and Congress must forthwith recognize and combat the widespread destruction and loss of vegetation growth, economic loss, and relentless spread of the imported fire ant, and that in the immediate future there is a dire need, as has been outlined in a proposed eradication program by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to conduct wholesale treatment of the invested States on a mass scale: Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the Mississippi State Senate, the House of Representatives concurring therein, That we do hereby deplore the unchecked and ever-growing menace of the imported fire ants in Mississippi and other affected States, and memorialize Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman and the Congress to immediately inaugurate a more militant fire ant eradication program in infested States, and to follow new guidelines of cooperation within the States, as has been suggested by the Department of Agriculture, to rid this nation of this destructive pest... [emphasis in original].

Although this program had already proven ineffective, and the impact of fire ants on agriculture was in reality minimal, Whitten helped secure $6.4 million in appropriations for the fire ant eradication program in 1967. This was more than the total funding budgeted by the USDA for screening the health effects of all agrochemicals.\textsuperscript{252}

In the USDA, chemicals took on an institutional life of their own as the funding for their research, development and application mushroomed. From the outset, though, the development, application and lack of regulation of agricultural toxins was animated by the virulent politics of southern white supremacists. These were the politics—deeply rooted in the Delta—of dispossession, exploitation and control. This foundation of the industrializing plantation project was threatened, however, by a growing struggle for freedom.

Chapter 5: The Struggle to Survive

Because of my belief in land reform, I have taken steps of acquiring land through cooperative ownership. In this manner, no individual has title to, or complete use of, the land. The concept of total individual ownership of huge acreages of land, by individuals, is at the center of our struggle for survival. In order for any people or nation to survive, land is necessary. However, individual ownership of land should not exceed the amount necessary to make a living.

-Fannie Lou Hamer, 1971.²⁵³

I. Introduction

In previous chapters, I have focused on the machinations of plantation and industrial agriculture that were necessary for the regime of control and ownership sustaining the white elite. Whitten, Stone and the Delta Council have provided a brief glimpse of the constant vigilance of the plantation bloc, and the shifting plantation project. This vigilance was necessary because they didn't rule a kingdom of inert and passive subjects. Rather, their control over plantation agriculture was constantly challenged. Theirs was a project of radical homogeneity and constant resistance to change, underwritten by unequal ownership of land and resources, control of the institutions of the state, and the ever-present threat of violence. Their vigilance was necessary because their brutal regime was challenged by the very black population on which it depended for survival. I have not intended to write resistance out of the story so

far—rather, resistance can be seen in the paranoia, brutal racism and shifting tactics for control deployed by the plantation elite. Only a group of people as dependent upon the labor of others as they were could devote as much time and capital as they did to the continuation of the plantation project.

The fever pitch of Whitten's insectophobia may seem strange without context, but he was reacting to a tremendous challenge to the political, racial and agricultural order he represented. As Whitten wrote *That We May Live*, black Deltans were mobilizing against second-class citizenship and the manufactured invisibility of agrarian exploitation. In this chapter, I focus on the central role that agriculture and landownership played in the black freedom struggles in the Delta, with particular attention to freedom struggle leader Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (which challenged the segregationist “regular” Democratic Party) and the associated Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. As I will describe, this focus is a reaction to the political effects of sanitized narratives of the civil rights era, but I emphatically do not intend to downplay the importance of other spheres of activism. Though this chapter is brief, the rest of this thesis could not exist without the assertions of humanity and resistances to exploitation by freedom struggle activists.

Recent historical work on the black freedom struggles in the United States South has provided a deeper look at the political struggles for black rights and the white supremacist countermobilizations. By highlighting the incredible complexities of the freedom struggles, these approaches do not reduce race to a functional unit, and demonstrate that change—be it in agriculture or in the institutions of the state—was far
from inevitable. Histories such as Hasan Kwame Jeffries' *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (2009) are powerfully attendant to the importance of place, the heterogeneity of actors, and the dynamic nature of both the Black Power movement and of white resistance.254 As Jeffries convincingly demonstrates in his text, freedom struggles and Black Power did not emerge spontaneously in Lowndes County. The transformation of politics in the Lowndes County of the 1960s was, Jeffries tells us, “more than a century in the making.”255 Similarly, Gretta De Jong (2002) points to strong local strands of resistance in rural Louisiana that precede the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. In *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana* De Jong demonstrates that a long history of resistance was drawn upon during the civil rights era.256 According to De Jong, it is necessary to “look beyond traditional conceptions of politics to fully appreciate the extent that African Americans and other oppressed peoples have participated in their liberation movements.”257 De Jong’s long history of the freedom struggles in rural Louisiana focuses on the opportunity that the Louisiana Farmers Union provided in the New Deal Era for many black farmers to broaden extant agricultural resistance through political organization. Gretta De Jong, like a number of other recent scholars, makes it clear that economic struggles and the movement for civil rights were intertwined during the 1960s. So too, Susan Ashmore (2008) draws out the intersections of national War on Poverty Programs, agrarian

255Ibid., p. 1.
257Ibid., p. 6.
activism in Alabama, and opposition from local white elites. Frustrated by pervasive discrimination in USDA programs and denied representation in local Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service committees, farmers formed the Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative Association (SWAFCA) as a vegetable-producing and marketing cooperative. The cooperative was opposed by the local agricultural elite, and agribusiness interests lobbied in Congress against their receipt of Office of Economic Opportunity funding. SWAFCA posed a threat to white political control in Alabama's Black Belt, helping thwart the mass eviction of farmworkers in the years after the Voting Rights Act of 1964.

As historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has argued, the ways in which the civil rights era is remembered have profound political and social implications in the present. In Hall's words, “remembrance is always a form of forgetting, and the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement—distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks, and various artifacts of mass culture—distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals.” Recent histories of the freedom struggles in the South have troubled the monumentalist narrative focused upon watershed moments in urban areas like Birmingham and Montgomery, unsettling simple distinctions between the urban and the rural, and between civil rights and Black Power. Attention to the complex objectives of

---


activists in the rural freedom struggles leaves no space for a depoliticized account of agrarian change. Rather, agriculture was a key terrain of activism, as well as a political and material technology of white resistance.

II. Fannie Lou Hamer

In 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer left the plantation where she worked as a timekeeper and sharecropper, having been given an ultimatum by planter W.D. Marlow that she either withdraw her registration to vote or leave.\footnote{Hamer, F. L., Brooks, M. P., & Houck, D. W. (2011). “I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired”. The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To tell it like it is. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. p. 59.} As historian Chana Kai Lee stresses, Hamer had behind her a lifetime of experience with the injustices of the plantation Delta. At one point, when Hamer was a young girl, her parents had saved enough money to purchase their own equipment and farm animals. This progress toward greater independence was arrested by a white man, who poisoned their farm animals with an insecticide.\footnote{Ibid., p. 15.} Hamer's deep personal knowledge of the indignities and exploitation of the white supremacist Delta were with her when she abandoned the limited security that a plantation could provide in exchange for the radical assertion of her right to vote. She began organizing voter registration drives with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), but was forced to leave Sunflower County when she was targeted by night riders for her activism.\footnote{Ibid., p. 34.} Lee argues that Hamer developed a sense of resolve during her exile in Cascilla—coincidentally, Jamie Whitten's “village”—which led her to
return to Sunflower County to continue the struggle for justice.\textsuperscript{264} She quickly became a leader in the freedom struggles in the Delta in spite of tremendous and violent resistance.\textsuperscript{265}

The registration and mobilization of black voters was a crucial component of Fannie Lou Hamer's early activism. As she said at a 1963 rally in Greenwood, “you know the ballot is good. If it wasn't good how come he trying to keep you from it and he still using it?”\textsuperscript{266} The struggle against injustice in the Delta, however, was not limited to securing the right to vote. Hamer had experienced firsthand the injustices of plantation agriculture, and the brutalities of segregation. Electoral power was one component of a broader struggle against hunger, against economic inequality, and against the many levels of dehumanization of the political economy of the plantation Delta. Fannie Lou Hamer eloquently expressed the injustices of racial capitalism, not only in the Delta, but in the United States as a whole. In a 1964 address she gave with Malcolm X, Hamer declared that “I've gone to a lot of big cities and I've got my first city to go to where this man wasn't standing with his feet on the black man's neck.”\textsuperscript{267} This violent image invoked the many registers of brutality and exploitation in the plantation South. In the same speech,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[264] Ibid., p. 35.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
she introduced herself by saying: “My name is Fannie Lou Hamer and I exist at 626 East Lafayette Street in Ruleville, Mississippi. The reason I say 'exist' [is] because we're excluded from everything in Mississippi but the tombs and the graves.”

Electoral power was one component of a multifaceted struggle to exist and to move beyond mere existence. As I have examined in previous chapters, the exercise of political power at the federal level reinforced racial exploitation and the plantation system in the Delta. Hamer challenged this power, and her efforts, along with those of many other activists, made it impossible for white politicians to ignore the existence of black Mississippians. Jamie Whitten certainly knew that Fannie Lou Hamer existed. In 1964, Hamer ran for Congress with the newly formed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Her opponent was none other than Jamie L. Whitten. Whitten won handily, but his victory was hardly an indication of the will of the majority of the Delta. Along with fellow MFDP candidates Victoria Gray and Ann Devine, Hamer challenged the right of Mississippi's congressmen to hold power. The challenge was straightforward—the state Democratic Party refused to recognize MFDP candidates, and blacks were widely excluded from voting. How, then, could Whitten and his cohort purport to democratically represent Mississippians? Hamer and the MFDP simply demanded that Congress “investigate the real story of voting in the state” before they seated Whitten, Thomas Abernathy, and John Bell Williams. “You gentlemen should know,” charged Hamer, “that the Negroes make up 58 percent of the potential voters of the Second Congressional

District. This means that if Negroes were allowed to vote freely, I could be sitting up here with you right now as a Congresswoman.”

The same year that Whitten celebrated that “the hands have left the village” in That We May Live, Hamer and the MFDP contested his very authority to sit in Congress:

You, Jamie L. Whitten, were purportedly nominated by the "regular" Democratic Party of Mississippi from which Negroes are and have been regularly and systematically excluded by illegal and unconstitutional registration and election procedures, and by intimidation, harassment, economic reprisal, property damage, terrorization, and violence. You were purportedly elected at the general election of November 3, 1964...by a vote claimed to be 70,218 out of a total of 306,463 persons of voting age in this congressional district, an electorate from which Negroes are regularly and systematically excluded by the same methods, techniques, and devices indicated above.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that the same House of Representatives that could countenance Jamie Whitten's power through the Subcommittee on Agricultural Appropriations rejected the MFDP challenge. As Whitten argued, at stake was “the orderly operation of the Congress for every Member and every delegation in both parties in the future.” As I have endeavored to show, this “orderly operation” of federal government was a crucial component of the plantation bloc's power. SNCC's voter mobilizations and the MFDP's challenges, then, confronted a pillar of plantation power—its translation into federal policy. This was, however, not the only aspect of white supremacy confronted by black activists in the Delta. Hamer was keenly aware of the role of unequal landownership and of the exploitation of labor. As the 1960s progressed,

---

271 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
she increasingly turned her attention to these foundations of racial injustice. In these efforts, she was not alone.

III. The Mississippi Freedom Labor Union

In 1965, the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU) was formed to organize farm laborers in the Delta in what one historian has termed “a truly quixotic effort” for better wages.273 Even though the MFLU's mobilization was thwarted, they also point to the willingness to mobilize against the injustice of an increasingly-depopulated agrarian landscape. In Congressional hearings on the minimum wage, several MFLU members presented their grievances. Their picture of the Delta sat in stark contrast with Whitten's technocratic celebration of agrarian change. The MFLU asked for $1.25 an hour for the diminishing work available in agriculture. As Andrew Hawkins of the MFLU testified, farm laborers made twenty cents an hour chopping cotton in 1940, yet they were only being payed thirty cents an hour a full quarter-century later. “If adequate minimum wage laws are not brought to these workers,” Hawkins urged, “the people of the Mississippi Delta will probably be starved back onto the farms at the same oppressive level of income as before; if they are allowed back to their old jobs at all.”274 Hawkins also pointed out the cruel absurdity of the term “sharecropping”:

Instead of working for an hourly wage, they are supposed to receive a part of the total from the goods produced on the land they work. The landowner is supposed to keep the cabin up in good living condition. He doesn't. He first

gives the sharecropper a 6-month's subsistence for his family. This usually runs about $3 an acre for whatever size ground you are working. He furnishes all the seed for planting. Usually, special permission is needed to plant a vegetable garden—something which he deducts rent for at the end of the year. Most of the sharecroppers are working for half of what the land produces. If the land produces 20 bales of cotton, you would automatically get 10. But from this 10 of the sharecropper's is taken the rent for the garden, doctor bills, seed, fertilizer, poison for boll weevils and weeds, electricity for the cabin and any other expenses, like interest on advances made during the year. The landowner is fully responsible for the sale of the cotton. The sharecropper must take the owner's word for what the cotton brought at market. ²⁷⁵

In addition to violence and political disenfranchisement, sharecroppers and wage laborers confronted an agricultural economy that was the product of federal policy, agricultural research, and a deep-rooted system of exploitation. Sharecropping, as Hawkins explained, was used to squeeze as much money out of workers as possible. At the same time, a combination of government policy and agricultural research had kept wages low, keeping negotiating power firmly in the hands of the same planters who were replacing workers with chemicals and machines. Whitten's hostility to labor, detailed in the previous chapter, was deeply rooted and served a purpose. In opposition to this perpetual devaluation of labor, the MFLU sought an extension of minimum wage coverage for farm laborers and sharecroppers, who were excluded from the federal Fair Labor Standards Act.²⁷⁶ Members of the MFLU testified to the entrenched system of control of land and labor, in which prisoners were forced to work on plantations as a condition of their parole, and children were forced from school to work in the fields.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 1902.
²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 1902.
²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 1918-1919.
To the MFLU's call for dignity in Delta agriculture, the Delta Council responded with their tired yet time-proven ode to the embattled farmer:

Cotton farmers are caught in [a] vicious cost-price squeeze characterized by spiraling cost of production goods and dwindling profits. Prices of farm machinery, farm chemicals, taxes, and other necessary production items continue to rise. At the same time cotton prices have gone down $17.85 per bale in the last 2 years and the outlook is for further reductions. Currently farmers have higher debts in relation to income than any other important segment of the economy. Inclusion of farm labor under minimum wages would prove [an] intolerable burden on [an] important segment of [the] U.S. Economy that is already depressed and would cause widespread displacement of farm labor now being utilized. This would create new pockets of poverty in rural America.278

While the Delta Council attempted to use the very capital-intensive agriculture that they had so unflaggingly advocated to justify the subjugation of labor, the MFLU refused to accept the inevitability of this exploitation. These hearings are of note precisely because of the pervasive historical exclusion of black agricultural workers from national policy debates. The constellation of elite agro-industrial interests—the Delta Council, the NCC, agrochemical manufacturers and their segregationist defenders—had historically been given free rein in Congress to speak on behalf of the Delta. As the political dominance of whites in the Delta was shaken, the MFLU dared to challenge the inevitability of racial exploitation in agriculture. The plantation elite vigorously defended a structure of agriculture so unequal that challenging it might seem quixotic, but for many activists, these challenges were central to the struggle for survival and dignity. In a system so dependent upon control of land and labor, these seemingly-hopeless challenges to white dominance had very real effects. As one plantation owner admitted,

278 Ibid., p. 2029-2030.

134
the MFLU strikers were “going to lose. But it already has helped boost the pay of others. Wages have gone higher around here.”

IV. Survival and Beyond.

Though Fannie Lou Hamer challenged the legitimacy of the regular Democrats in national politics, her concern was with the vast inequalities of the Delta, and entrenched electoral power was only one component of these inequalities. The freedom struggles were, in a very real sense, struggles for material survival and for life itself. As I briefly mentioned in chapter four, politicians like Jamie Whitten were more-than-willing to leverage their political power to deny black Mississippians food—the very substance of the right to survive. Whitten, true to form, used his political muscle to ensure that Mississippi was removed from a 1967 report by the Johnston administration on malnutrition.\footnote{Kotz, N. (1967). \textit{Let Them Eat Promises: The Politics of Hunger in America.} Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall., p. 85.} Even as dispossession was intensified along with the application of pesticides and herbicides, Whitten and other Mississippi Congressmen fought tooth-and-nail against funding for Food Stamps.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 84-102.} Fortunately for the white elite, the Food Stamp funding was controlled by the United States Department of Agriculture, which was in turn beholden to the white elite. This intransigence certainly had implications that extended beyond Mississippi, but it served as a mechanization of white resistance to the freedom struggles in the Delta.

In *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, historian Charles Payne (1995) documents the use of hunger as a political tactic of white resistance. In Leflore County, blacks active in the freedom struggles faced the denial of surplus food commodities necessary to survive the winter.\(^{282}\) In 1963, the Leflore County Board of Supervisors refused to distribute even the inadequate surplus food commodities provided by the federal government, forcing SNCC to run a nationwide food drive.\(^{283}\) This use of food as a weapon of coercion was repeated time after time in the Delta, and was enthusiastically abetted by Congressmen like Whitten. The switch from free commodity distribution to the Food Stamp program in the late 1960s—a change supported by Whitten and requiring the purchase of stamps—meant that many of the poorest residents of the Delta were cut off from the meager aid to which they formerly had access.\(^{284}\)

White resistance to the freedom struggles represented an intensification of the racial politics of enforced marginality that had long been the sustenance of the Delta plantation elite. In Congress, a North Carolina doctor who had visited the Delta testified that his group "heard charges of an unwritten but generally accepted policy on the part of those who control the State to eliminate the Negro in Mississippi, either by driving him out of the State or starving him to death. At first the charge seemed to me beyond belief. Yet now reviewing all that we saw and heard it becomes more and more credible."\(^{285}\)

---


\(^{283}\) Ibid., pp. 158-159.


Black farmers and landowners had—to some extent—protection against the weapons of white coercion, and many played active roles in the freedom struggles. In Holmes County, landowners from Mileston—the cooperative community established during the New Deal era, mentioned in chapter three—became the first blacks in Holmes County to register to vote. Throughout the Delta, Mississippi and the rural South, black-owned land served as a meeting places and bases of operations, providing a degree of insulation against coercion and violence. The remarkable persistence of the very farmers who had survived decades of physical and economic violence would shape the movement for a different Delta. Farms didn't simply serve as bases of power for the freedom struggles, though—the myriad inequalities of Delta agriculture were themselves a crucial target of activism.

In a number of southern states, and particularly in Alabama and Mississippi, activists targeted the white control of county Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) offices, the Farmers Home Administration (FHA), and the Federal Extension Services (FES). These county agents served as the institutional ground troops of the pro-planter policies of the USDA. A 1968 Southern Rural Research Project (SRRP) report details the discrimination and enforcement of inequality through county-level offices in Alabama. White-controlled county offices discriminated against black farmers; “Every black farmer knows that his presence is unwanted—tolerated at best—in these offices,” where “black farmers are called by their first names—or simply by 'boy' or

'nigger'.” Three-fourths of the farmers interviewed for the report had never received any help from anyone at their county ASCS office, 87% had never received any loan assistance from the county FHA office, and four-fifths had never been visited by a federal extension agent.

As a consequence, black farmers were kept uninformed of the federal policies designed by Whitten and his colleagues. The effects of this discrimination were profound. According to the report, “While 80% of the black farmers had expressed a dissatisfaction with cotton farming, the ASCS had never informed black people of the Federal programs that will help ease them out of cotton, and into more lucrative kinds of agriculture. If black farmers have heard of the FHA at all, they think that the only kinds of loans they can get are small ones (for example, for seed and fertilizer) which do nothing to change the sub-standard level of working and living.” In Washington, officials had ample evidence of the enforcement of inequalities through southern county-level offices. A 1965 report by the US Commission on Civil Rights documented in detail the separate and highly unequal structure of extension services, and pervasive discrimination against black farmers. The Johnson administration, however, was largely unwilling to challenge the policies of Orville Freeman and Jamie Whitten's USDA. The Johnson administration was hardly the guarantor of civil rights in the South;

288 Ibid., pp. 6-8.
289 Ibid., p. 10.
290 Ibid., p. 12.
rather, they tepidly responded to the southern freedom struggles. Movement activists
would not sit back and wait for uncertain and limited federal involvement—the
exigencies of injustice required more immediate action.

In many Mississippi counties, activists targeted ASCS elections, which did not
require a literacy test or poll tax for participation.292 The Council of Federated
Organizations, SNCC, the MFDP and the MFLU confronted exclusion and entrenched
power in the local USDA. An joint MFDP and MFLU pamphlet, for example, explained
the importance of the ASCS, clearly described the election procedures and urging
participation.293 The ASCS campaigns extended the movement for democratic inclusion
to agriculture, and many of the candidates had already been active in voter registration
efforts.294 Contrary to depoliticized narratives of the era, though, democratic processes
were a means rather than an end.

Throughout the 1960s, Fannie Lou Hamer's activism was targeted against the
structures of exclusion and oppression that made Mississippi so hostile to even the
existence of poor blacks. She actively supported the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union,
and founded a cooperative Freedom Farm near Ruleville in 1969 with financial support
from an organization in Wisconsin.295 Hamer envisioned Freedom Farms as “a[n]
agricultural Mecca for blacks.” “We must feed people,” Hamer said, “for hunger is the

292 Dittmer, J. (1994). Local People: The struggle for civil rights in Mississippi. Urbana: University of
293 Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service election brochure. The Freedom Information
294 “The Cotton Vote in Mississippi. (December 11, 1964). COFO news. Available online at:
enemy. Land is food and food feeds people...The condition is crucial....”

Hamer estimated that over 1,000 families benefited from the farm—which had fewer acres than many of the depopulated plantations in the Delta—in one way or another. As the shift to Food Stamps tilted the delicate balance against survival for many families, and movement activists faced retaliation, the cooperative provided food, shelter and work. The Freedom Farms Cooperative provided a radically different model than the USDA Food Stamp program, which—thanks in no small part to Jamie Whitten—benefited large farmers at the expense of the poor and the hungry. In contrast with the agro-industrial system, which itself subsisted on hunger and disenfranchisement, the Freedom Farms Cooperative had empowerment and survival at its core. As Hamer described it, “the plan of the thing is that it can grow to produce enough that people just won't know what hunger is, you know...If people didn't have to have food now, buy food, you could get off a lot cheaper.”

Fannie Lou Hamer refused to draw easy distinctions between civil rights and Black Power. Voting was important because “as more and more blacks become registered the 'old line racist politician' will begin to feel uncomfortable, because he will feel threatened at the thought of Black Power.” In that same speech, Hamer made the radical statement with which this chapter opened—“The concept of total individual ownership of huge acreages of land, by individuals, is at the center of our struggle for

298 Ibid., p. 24.
survival. In order for any people or nation to survive, land is necessary. However, individual ownership of land should not exceed the amount necessary to make a living.”

V. Conclusion

Triumphant narratives of the civil rights movement are plentiful—blacks secured the right to vote, black politicians were elected, the last vestiges of an anachronistic plantation system were shattered, and only persistent poverty stands between the Delta and a brighter future. To be certain, the victories of the 1960s and the 1970s were substantial. Even as virulent an “old line racist politician” as Jamie Whitten saw the proverbial writing on the wall, gradually falling into uneven line with the national Democratic platform during the 1980s. In 1986 Mike Espy—a black candidate who secured tepid support from Delta agricultural interests by opposing Ronald Reagan’s unpopular farm policies—became the first black U.S. representative from Mississippi since the Reconstruction era. Espy would later become Secretary of Agriculture under Bill Clinton.

The importance of the many shifts in Mississippi politics since the 1960s is undeniable, but far too often, historical narratives sever civil rights from Black Power.

---

300 Ibid., p. 142.
This willed amnesia serves to naturalize the unequal landscapes of the Delta in the present day, making the continued concentration of agro-industry and the overwhelmingly white ownership of land acceptable. Many activists, including Fannie Lou Hamer, saw a tight connection between concentrated landownership, racial exploitation, and life-threatening poverty. The freedom struggles presented more than a challenge to segregation and disenfranchisement—they provided a vision of a profoundly different economy. Survival and participation were the necessary starting points for agrarian activism in the Delta, which was centered upon livelihoods, health, and the re-peopling of the landscape. To be certain, many black Deltans welcomed the opportunity to leave agriculture, which was tied to a long history of oppression. For those who remain, however, industrial agriculture maintains the white supremacist structure of landownership and the processes of unequal risk and profit. It bears the indelible mark of its white supremacist beginnings—disrespect for human bodies, a prioritization concentrated profit over welfare, the material properties of an endless war on insects and people, and the constant pressure towards homogenization.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

My focus on the processes through which the past constitutes the present should not be taken as a denial of very substantial shifts in the racial, political and economic terrain of the Delta. I focus on continuities, however, to challenge a particular historicization that fixes the past, treats racial identity as static, and presents a thoroughly depoliticized notion of place. The effects of this historicization are profoundly political in the identities that they create and the processes that they obscure. Racial inequality in the Delta is material and tangible, even as representations of that inequality fix it as an object that is characteristic of region and race. This is what I have written against; agrarian change as rupture, and the Delta as a place that is at once timeless and immobilized in the past.

The Delta is a place where particular manifestation of white supremacy have congealed around social relations and ecological processes; a common frame of reference and a contested terrain. Yet multi-scalar processes cut through space, eroding the boundaries of the Delta and constituting its core. Clyde Woods urged that we take seriously “the unique set of regional relations that gave rise to North American neo-liberalism,” or the “‘Mississippification' of the United States and the world'.”\textsuperscript{303} The

regional struggles and ideological formations surrounding agriculture in Mississippi, in fact, profoundly shaped the development of agro-industry and United States agricultural politics. It is insufficient to merely look at how “race” plays a role in agriculture, holding these as two separate variables. The development of agro-industry in Mississippi and the United States was—from the outset—tightly interwoven with the formation of racial identities. Racism and white supremacy are not simply an effect of biotechnology when genetically modified seeds are used to push traditional farmers in the global South off of their land. White supremacy has been—in a sense—cycling through the agro-industry since its very inception.

Since black farmers were not inferior farmers, they posed a tremendous threat to white supremacy in agriculture. Those who worked the land had far more experience with the practice of agriculture than did the planters. Therefore, in the eyes of the plantation elite, black farming needed to be undermined or destroyed, and their labor controlled. Plantation agriculture was dependent upon land and—contrary to the assertion of Stone—labor. Black farmers controlled their own labor, owned their own land, and—through their potential success in challenging white domination of agriculture—laid bare theories of white superiority. The destruction of the independence of black farmers was no easy task. It was not a limited to the denial of loans, discrimination by institutions of the USDA, or racial terror and violence. These are each, in their own account, grave injustices that have not been sufficiently addressed. Addressing any of these in isolation would be insufficient, however, because they were interdependent components of a broader machination.
As plantation agriculture was “modernized” in the twentieth century, these components were channeled into a discursive and material strategy of productivism, even as the racial component of “racial competition” was concealed. Any innovation that would increase production per acre and relative to labor was pursued, regardless of the environmental and human consequences. At the same time, black farmers were denied access to these innovations even as they were cast as inferior for not adopting the most productive ‘modern' practices. As these technologies helped undermine black livelihoods, the materialities of agricultural chemicals made the Delta an increasingly-toxic environment. At the national level, this strategy was pursued through an emphasis on the development and adoption of technology—an emphasis that meshed well with the guiding philosophies of national agricultural productivity. For this reason, the agrarian politics of the Delta's plantation bloc translated well into the agricultural policies of the state.

Delta politicians—including but not limited to Jamie Whitten—were in a position to effect policies that favored the plantation bloc in the transition to agro-industry. These policies could be effectively pursued at the national level without explicit attention to race. White control of land and institutions of the state in the Delta, moreover, guaranteed the efficient translation of these policies into practices of domination. “Racial superiority” could be invoked when needed and physical coercion employed where necessary, but the “post-racial” strategies for undermining black livelihoods, destroying black lives, and pathologizing black practices were developed well before the 1960s. The material, economic and political realities of agriculture in the present day are profoundly
shaped by the war on black farming and landownership. In the continued stress on productivity, in the unwillingness to adequately confront the negative (and unequally born) health effects of agricultural chemicals, and in the acceptance of unequal access to affordable and healthy food, we can see the imprint of the past—the multiply-violent levels of the white supremacist strategy to undermine black livelihoods.

During the brutal overthrow of Reconstruction, white supremacists used ideologies of superiority and an intimate knowledge of the technologies of violence developed during slavery to reclaim white supremacy from the very-real threat of black economic and political power. In a similar way, the present-day technologies of control and ideologies of superiority were formed from the brutalities of the segregationist Delta. They are dependent upon the continued acceptance that white ownership of land and resources is *natural*, and that white institutions—such as the Delta Council and the unreformed USDA—are the normative center from which the Delta's “persistent inequality” can be addressed. It is high time to acknowledge the ways in which historical racial injustice constitute agriculture in the present day. A focus on the ways in which inequality—economic, environmental, and political—has been reproduced through agro-industry can subvert the naturalization of white supremacy in the Delta. Far more powerfully, however, are the ways in which black farmers continue to lay bare the myths of white supremacy through agricultural practice.

The most consequential effects of agro-industry in the Delta are not its obvious products of rice, corn, soybeans, cotton and catfish. Agro-industry in the Delta is important not simply for its commodities—which are sent elsewhere—but for what it
Agro-industry occupies the Delta's land, and stands in the way of more meaningful and socially embedded food practices. The chemical byproducts and decimated food systems are productive of the health inequalities that are often blamed on black failure to adhere to normalized white practices of food consumption and self-care. Agro-industry serves to both materially sustain and ideologically justify white control of land and resources, as it seals off other possibilities. The double function of agro-industry is to keep agriculture in white hands and to preclude the demands for black landownership. For this reason it is an essential element of white supremacy in the present day.

At the core of the continued power of the Delta's white elite is the definition of racial difference as a problem while creating very material problems that they positions themselves to “fix.” My argument is not that the Delta Council and agro-industry are the root of all inequality in the Delta—rather, Council-led agro-industrial development is a crucial component of inequality-as-is. The widespread use of agricultural chemicals and the concentrated ownership of land is used to position Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management (closely associated with the Delta Council) as the champions of responsible land use and environmental conservation. The negative health outcomes of toxic environments and food inequality provide the Delta Health Alliance with ample opportunity to claim that they are indeed doing invaluable work. The economic inequality born of a sustained war on black livelihoods is mobilized by the Delta Council.

304 It is important to acknowledge that I am using the Delta Council as a reference for a spectrum of activities that are allied—even if they are sometimes in contradiction with each other—in the racialization of problems in the Delta.
to argue that their vision of development—be it industrial or agro-industrial—is necessary. Inequalities in education opportunities—many past Delta Council members were active in the Citizen's Council's efforts to decimate public education and maintain segregation—provide the Delta Council with an effective means of using credentialization in order to keep the Delta Council leadership overwhelmingly white.

This is not to argue that the Delta Council is an unstoppable juggernaut. The seventy-five years spent ceaselessly maintaining a “Organized, Unified, Co-Ordinated” front makes it clear that the Delta Council is well-aware of its vulnerability, and the threat posed by diversity. It is also a source of great hope that the Delta Council is a tangle of contradictions. The conservation work done by Delta F.A.R.M. isn't fully reconcilable with the environmental destruction of industrial agriculture. To the extent that the Delta Health Alliance is truly concerned with health, they cannot fully ignore the violence to bodies through agro-industry, and the fact that it does not produce food for consumption within the Delta. The Delta Health Alliance's community garden initiative in particular brings these contradictions into stark relief.

It is likely that *de jure* segregation and disenfranchisement were the strongest adhesive of an “Organized, Unified, Co-Ordinated” whiteness in the Delta. The decades of black activism and mobilization so-often concealed by the term the “Civil Rights Movement” (limited in scope, successful in its objectives, no longer necessary) were indeed a blow against the unified agrarian elite. In a similar way, the growing diversity of the USDA has weakened white elite control over the county-level USDA offices, historically the “front lines” in the war against black farmers and landowners. As the
contradictions of the Delta Council and agro-industry continue to open, the work of black farmers, health activists and community organizers remain as important as ever. It is even likely that many transformation-oriented people are working in and through the Delta Council in the present day. It is crucial, though, that the institutions of the state come to terms with their longstanding relationship of convenience with the Delta's white elite. If the USDA *truly* intends to confront its abysmal civil rights record, now is the time.
Archival Resources, Contemporary Texts and Institutional Publications


McComas, P.S. & Welch, F.J. (October, 1943). “Farm Labor Requirements in Mississippi.” Mississippi Farm Research 6(10),


Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station. (May 1963.) “Cotton Insect Control, 1963.” Mississippi Farm Research, 26(5).


Stone, A. H., & Fort, J. H. (1910). The truth about the boll weevil: Being some observations on cotton growing under boll weevil conditions in certain areas of Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi. Greenville, Miss.


Welch, F.J. (November, 1943). “Mississippi's Agricultural Production Goals for 1944 Call for Increased Acreage.” Mississippi Farm Research, 6(11).


Books, Articles and Dissertations


Congressional Testimony


Newspapers and Contemporary Articles


“The big money in AAA.” (Apr 9, 1936). *Chicago Daily Tribune.*, p. 16,