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A Corporate Plantation Reading Public:
Labor, Literacy, and Diaspora
in the Global Black South

Abstract This essay reconstructs the history of the *Cotton Farmer*, a rare African American newspaper edited and published by black tenant farmers employed by the Delta and Pine Land Company, once the world's largest corporate cotton plantation located in the Mississippi delta. The *Cotton Farmer* ran from 1919 to circa 1927 and was mainly confined to the company's properties. However, in 1926, three copies of the paper circulated to Bocas del Toro, Panama, to a Garveyite and West Indian migrant laborer employed on the infamous United Fruit Company's vast banana and fruit plantations. Tracing the *Cotton Farmer*'s hemispheric circulation from the Mississippi delta to Panama, this essay explores the intersections of labor, literacy, and diaspora in the global black south. What do we make of a reading public among black tenant farmers on a corporate cotton plantation in the Mississippi delta at the height of Jim Crow? How did the entanglements of labor and literacy at once challenge and correspond with conventional accounts of sharecropping in the Jim Crow South? Further, in light of the *Cotton Farmer*'s circulation from Mississippi's cotton fields to Panama's banana fields, this essay establishes the corporate plantation as a heuristic for exploring the imperial logics and practices tying the US South to the larger project of colonial domination in the Caribbean and Latin America, and ultimately reexamines black transnationalism and diaspora from the position of corporate plantation laborers as they negotiated ever-evolving modes of domination and social control on corporate plantations in the global black south. In so doing, it establishes black agricultural and corporate plantation laborers as architects of black geographic thought and diasporic practice alongside their urban, cosmopolitan contemporaries.

Keywords transnationalism, black geographies, global south, Garveyism, print culture

Once touted as the world's largest cotton plantation, the Delta and Pine Land Company (DPL) was a constellation of eighteen plantations located in the rich alluvial lands of Washington and Bolivar Counties in the Mississippi delta. With approximately thirty-five thousand acres of land under cultivation, the company

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required a considerable labor force, consisting of several thousand black sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and day laborers.¹ In 1919, at the request of Reverend Addison “Ad” Wimbs, a black tenant farmer, DPL agreed to finance the *Cotton Farmer*, a plantation newspaper written, edited, and published by a committee of black tenant farmers from each plantation. The *Cotton Farmer* ran from 1919 to circa 1927 and had a paid circulation of more than thirteen hundred subscribers per year, mainly confined to DPL’s properties. While the Mississippi delta had once been a thriving enclave of New Negro enterprise in the late nineteenth century, by the 1910s, widespread black land ownership had eroded into new modes of racial capitalist dispossession and dependency, such as sharecropping and tenant farming on corporate plantations. Though black sharecroppers and tenant farmers were routinely coerced into perennial cycles of debt stemming, in part, from their inability to read and comprehend labor contracts, DPL—a corporate plantation governed by modern scientific management techniques—promoted a reading and writing public as a strategy to recruit and retain (yet ultimately placate and surveil) a newly mobile black labor force. By delineating how DPL’s labor policies both corresponded with and challenged predominant accounts of sharecropping and tenant farming, I argue that the history of the *Cotton Farmer* elucidates a more nuanced portrait of the entanglements of race, labor, and literacy in the rural Jim Crow South.

Despite its mostly local circulation, brief existence, and thus relative obscurity, the *Cotton Farmer*’s material and archival history also situates delta sharecroppers and tenant farmers within the hemisphere’s transnational circuits of labor, trade, print culture, and political activism. Most copies of the *Cotton Farmer* were likely destroyed by the angry waters of the muddy Mississippi River, when, in 1927, the region experienced the worst river flood in US history, leaving DPL’s plantations under three to fifteen feet of water from March to July and nearly wiping out the entire cotton crop for that year. The single extant issue, dated February 5, 1927, was discovered in the Marcus Garvey files at the National Archives, indicating not only the paper’s unique role in cultivating a black corporate plantation reading public in the delta, already an anomaly, but also revealing a dynamic, yet relatively underexplored geography of black transnational mobility and diasporic affiliation among sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and migrant laborers during the interwar years.² Specifically, the issue

provides evidence of the paper's circulation to an Afro-Caribbean migrant laborer in Panama and a photograph of a former DPL employee who migrated to the delta from Jamaica. This Afro-Caribbean presence at DPL situates the delta as a node within the black hemispheric literary and (labor) migration circuit that I call the *global black south*, a term I flesh out more fully below.

On the front page of the issue, Wimbs published correspondence from John J. Smith, a reader in Shepard Island, Bocas del Toro, Panama, requesting a subscription to the *Cotton Farmer*. Though surprised that the paper had traveled such a vast distance, Wimbs speculated that it "had reached Panama . . . on account of its [sympathetic] attitude towards Marcus Garvey" (Wimbs 1927). With seventeen Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) divisions in Bolivar County, Mississippi, alone, the most of any county in the United States, the Garvey movement had a stronghold in the delta (Rolinson 2007: 109). It also had a significant following in Bocas del Toro and throughout Central America, due to Afro-Caribbean labor migration to the Panama Canal Zone and the infamous United Fruit Company's (UFCO) vast banana and fruit plantations. As Panama's largest banana-producing region, Bocas del Toro mirrored the Mississippi delta as a public organized around the corporate plantation (Bourgeois 1989). Indeed, the two regions came into formation simultaneously and under similar conditions of foreign capital investment and black labor. Thus, Garveyism and the corporate plantation helped to facilitate the *Cotton Farmer's* hemispheric circulation.

If Smith's subscription request indicates how corporate plantation laborers participated in a transnational periodical network, then the issue's photographic feature of a migrant laborer from "Jamaica Island" situates the delta within a hemispheric labor migration circuit as well. In the column adjacent to Smith's letter, Wimbs announced the return of Reverend A. B. Brown, a former sharecropper on DPL's Dixon Plantation, who, as Wimbs notes, was "better known on the Scott Syndicate as 'Jamaica.'" The photograph of Brown depicts him standing in front of a wood fence, dressed in a dark suit coat and dress slacks, posing with his head down, and reading what appears to be an open Bible in his right hand (*Cotton Farmer* 1927a). According to Wimbs, Brown had "cropped on Dixon Plantation for several years and each year paid his account and cleared money." How a Jamaican migrant laborer found his way to a corporate cotton plantation in the

Mississippi delta remains a mystery, but I propose that his trajectory illuminates the region's significance as a locus of black transnational activity alongside more notable port cities such as New Orleans and Mobile (Alabama), Colón (Panama), and Limón (Costa Rica).

Through the *Cotton Farmer's* hemispheric circulation to Panama and Reverend Brown's migration from Jamaica to the delta, this essay interrogates the intersections of labor, literacy, and diaspora on the corporate plantation in the global black south. As an institution that at once extended and refined the racial and managerial logics of the antebellum plantation, the corporate plantation represents what I call an *afterlife of the plantation*. A distinct "afterlife of slavery," the afterlife of the plantation describes the institutions, logics, and practices that evolved in the wake of emancipation, yet were specifically tied to the physical spaces and biopolitical functions of the plantation as a mode of labor organization and large-scale commodity production for global markets.³ Beginning in the late nineteenth century, corporate plantations spread throughout much of what scholars now refer to as the "global south." This essay, however, focuses on the *global black south* as a subregion of the global south that stretches from the US South to the Caribbean and the Caribbean coast of Latin America. While scholars have referred to this hemispheric cartography as the "Plantation Americas" and "the circum-Caribbean," I insist on the designation *global black south* to foreground the cultural and political contributions of southern African Americans within black transnational and diaspora studies.⁴ In the field of black geographies, Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (2007: 6) call for "unraveling the ostensible mysteries that take place when subaltern geographies are theorized, lived, creatively expressed, and socially produced." "In the humanities," they continue, "spatial metaphors abound through analyses of black creative texts, yet they are often theorized as detached from concrete three-dimensional geographies" (7). By resituating the *Cotton Farmer*, the corporate plantation, and the Mississippi delta within a hemispheric framework, I propose the global black south as one such "subaltern" and "three-dimensional geography" that takes seriously "the geographic knowledges that black subjects impart[ed]" as they navigated the treacherous afterlives of the plantation (6).

The essay's structure mirrors the *Cotton Farmer's* trajectory from Mississippi's cotton plantations to Panama's banana fields. First, the essay mines disparate and rare archival sources to examine DPL and

the *Cotton Farmer* as vistas into the afterlife of the plantation in the delta. Instead of perpetuating racial violence and coercion, as was typical of the neoplantation regime, DPL enacted welfare capitalism and paternalism to “manage” black workers, hence financing a corporate plantation reading public. As a record of black social life, the *Cotton Farmer* indicates how black delta residents strategically negotiated the foreclosed futures of economic independence that had initially attracted their foreparents to the region after emancipation. DPL’s anomalous support for the paper and various other black domestic, social, and educational institutions enabled workers to pursue tenant farming as a seemingly viable employment option, mostly absent racial violence; yet, the company’s insistence on social control and paternalism, I argue, ultimately evinces racial capitalism’s insidious and protean capacity to coopt the very scripts of liberal subjecthood—that is, literacy as a marker of humanity and modality of freedom—to reinscribe and prolong plantation logics and practices.

Tracing the *Cotton Farmer*’s transnational circulation to Panama, I then reconstruct the afterlife of the plantation in the global black south as a dynamic hemispheric geography from above and below. Whereas colonialism and imperialism in the Caribbean and Latin America and Jim Crow in the United States are rightly viewed as divergent afterlives of the plantation, a comparative analysis of DPL and UFCO elucidates the corporate plantation as a biopolitical regime that produced similar conditions of black life throughout the hemisphere. As such, this essay contributes to the growing body of scholarship that repositions the US South in relation to the broader global south (Woodruff 2012; Darden 2009; Smith and Cohn 2004). At the same time, as McKittrick and Woods (2007: 5) observe, “Within and against the grain of dominant modes of power, knowledge, and space, black geographic narratives and lived experiences need to be taken seriously because they reconfigure classificatory spatial practices.” Thus, rather than simply being bound to the land through violence, coercion, and debt, I show how black laborers appropriated hegemonic structures such as corporate plantation shipping and migration networks to circulate newspapers and spread ideas about labor activism and racial solidarity. Generally, scholarship in black transnational and diaspora studies in the interwar years focuses on artists and intellectuals traveling between urban cosmopolitan centers in the global north (Edwards 2003; Stephens 2005; Putnam 2013). The *Cotton Farmer*,

however, broadens this cartography by illuminating the Mississippi delta and Bocas del Toro as rural New Negro enclaves, where black agricultural workers crafted geopolitical knowledges and enacted their own sharecropper and tenant farmer transnationalism from below that undermined corporate plantation disciplinary aims. Ultimately, by reconstructing the history of this rare corporate plantation newspaper, this essay makes a theoretical and methodological intervention in black transnational and diaspora studies: centering the literary, cultural and political activities of black workers in the rural plantation regions of the Americas, I maintain, elucidates *the afterlife of the plantation in the global black south* as a dynamic, yet often neglected and undertheorized region of “black geographic thought” and diasporic connectivity (McKittrick and Woods 2007: 6).

**Race and Labor on a Corporate Plantation:
Paternalism, Welfare Capitalism, and Social Control**

Following the Civil War, the Mississippi delta was essentially a new frontier, as 90 percent of the region was covered in swamps and dense wilderness. African Americans from older parts of the South, foreign-born immigrants, southern planters, and northern businessmen poured into the area in pursuit of better economic opportunities through cotton farming on its rich alluvial soils. Though it would eventually become one of the most impoverished and racially oppressive regions in the United States, the delta was initially an enclave of New Negro enterprise, where black southerners laid claim to the new possibilities of free labor and citizenship.⁵ These agrarian New Negroes agreed to cultivate the delta wilderness for white landowners in hopes of raising the down payment to purchase property of their own. Initially, their efforts were successful, as black people made up three-fourths of delta farm owners by 1900 and, in Bolivar County, established Mound Bayou as one of the earliest and most successful all-black towns in the country. By the 1910s, however, Jim Crow—the nation’s newest iteration of racial capitalist subjugation, replete with disfranchisement, lynching, and land dispossession—turned this hopeful generation of freed women and men from self-determined farmers into a largely dependent proletariat, sharecropping and tenant farming on the region’s corporate plantations (Willis 2000; Woodruff 2012).

Much like their colonial and antebellum antecedents, business or corporate plantations were technologies of settler colonialism combined with the efficiency of industrial factories. Their emergence throughout the US South was coterminous with “the growth of big business in the [US] North” (Woodman 2001: 809–10). In some instances, corporate plantations were established on former antebellum plantations, but many were new enterprises altogether. They “were the most modern, well-organized, closely supervised agricultural operations in the cotton South” (801). As Progressive Era enterprises, they prioritized “scientific management, which required the close supervision of a routinized and disciplined labor force” (Woodruff 2012: 2). To ensure worker efficiency and productivity, plantation managers employed practices of surveillance and social control “from plowing to sales” over their already racialized distribution of labor (Woodman 1982: 225). A prototypical corporate plantation, DPL was established in the 1910s by the Fine Cotton Spinners and Doublers’ Association, a British company that invested in the Mississippi delta to produce cotton for its textile mills in Manchester, England. Combining corporate management techniques with the racial hierarchy of antebellum slavery and Jim Crow, each of its eighteen sites primarily employed black tenants supervised by a white plantation manager and a black foreman (*Manufacturer’s Record* 1923: 105).

As the world’s largest cotton plantation, DPL required a considerable labor force, especially since the Great Migration and World War I presented black southerners with seemingly viable alternatives to agricultural work through urban and industrial occupations. The company regularly engaged in labor expeditions to the backwoods of Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Alabama to recruit tenants (Quinn Papers, folder 8). In plantation managers’ meetings, L. K. Salsbury, DPL’s executive manager from 1912 to 1927, expressed constant urgency and anxiety over recruiting and retaining enough laborers to work the plantations and stressed that surveillance of the company’s workforce was imperative:

The great difficulty we have before us now is our labor problem—not only getting labor, but keeping it. You are going to have [to do] everything you can do to maintain your present quota. . . . We must keep up with each and every tenant all the time; know what they are thinking about and what they are going to do. . . . We have got

to be firm with these negroes and see that they carry out their contracts. (DPL Company Records, box 13, folder 1923, managers' meeting minutes, June 11, 1923, 4)

For Salsbury, black laborers were an unmanageable, mercurial lot, a constant flight risk liable to break their contracts by escaping to the US North or seeking employment on neighboring plantations. He also frequently conflated "labor," a practice or service performed, with "laborers"—sentient, agential beings—indicating his low estimation of DPL's workforce and how the corporate plantation essentially reinscribed racial capitalism by reducing black ontology to black labor power. In a 1921 annual report, managers complained: "Labor conditions were unsatisfactory the entire year. Labor was high and difficult to handle, and doing as little work as possible, and we were doubtful at all times whether we received one hundred cents worth of work for each dollar paid out" (DPL Company Records, box 1, folder 1, annual report, 1921). To rectify this problem, the company demanded strict oversight and surveillance, evincing its flagrant white paternalism: "Our tenants are the best in the world," Salsbury noted at a managers' meeting, "although they are like children and need watching. Our tenants, as a rule, would have all their profits spent before they make a crop unless you hold them [their commissary accounts] down and give them only what is necessary" (DPL Company Records, box 13, folder 1923, managers' meeting minutes, March 15, 1923, 2–3).

Unlike most accounts of sharecropping and tenant farming in the Jim Crow South, DPL does not appear to have ensnared or immobilized workers by fabricating debts or through acts of physical violence, deception, or coercion. According to Merle C. Prunty Jr. (1962: 159), prior to World War II, "Contract renewals ranged from 87 to 92 per cent annually," which were "reportedly . . . unusually high rates" and thus suggested that "the Negro sharecropper considered his lot at Deltapine superior to that available to him elsewhere."⁶ Frank David Quinn, DPL's stenographer who surveilled the *Cotton Farmer's* content, recalls only a single instance of "extreme violence" against black workers. The general manager, Professor Jesse William Fox, suspected a tenant of stealing cotton and, "without giving him [the tenant] a chance to explain," started "cursing, kicking and actually stomping him [the tenant] until he ran out of the office, begging for mercy" (Quinn Papers, folder 7). They soon discovered that a

plantation manager had made an accounting error, and the tenant was in fact innocent. Reflecting on the incident, Quinn recalled, "I am happy to say that this was an extreme and isolated case because that was not in any way our policy of treating tenants." Rather, as a modern corporate plantation that "wore the face of science and progressivism" (Woodruff 2012: 1), DPL sought to control laborers through welfare programs and the seemingly innocuous violence of surveillance and white paternalism. Reading against the archival grain, however, I would conjecture that if this single account of physical violence made its way into the archive, then Quinn's claim that it was an "extreme and isolated case" is highly dubious at best.

Nevertheless, by most accounts, DPL seems to have been convinced that a contented tenantry was far more productive than a fearful one and, as such, offered numerous incentives to placate employees. Salsbury stressed that "to hold the labor on the plantations of the South better living conditions must be furnished" (Smith 1923: 71). To that end, DPL reportedly provided tenants with modern, sanitary housing and medical care. As one observer noted of black domestic life at DPL:

The old-fashioned log cabin has been entirely disappeared, replaced by comfortable sealed houses with good floors and roofs. The slab-door window is no more, but all of the company houses have ample glass windows, insuring abundant sunlight and ventilation. Wells drilled to uncontaminated water strata are supplied to each house, and welfare workers encourage the planting of vegetable gardens and flowers and the adoption of sanitary conditions, wholesome preparation of foods and other home economics. As fall approaches and the crops are laid by, the tenants are furnished with teams and wagons, and huge piles of wood are prepared for winter fuel. (Smith 1923: 71)

Contrary to this quite generous (and likely exaggerated) account of tenant housing, Lawrence J. Nelson (1999: 105) contends, "Actually, the off-ground cypress structures were crowded, their architecture usually of the 'shot-gun' variety—two rooms in a row with a door at each end, or four-room type for larger families." Whatever the specific state of tenant housing, DPL did in fact hold that improving the material conditions of black domestic life through welfare capitalism was a key strategy in keeping this newly mobile (and often fugitive) labor

force rooted on its vast cotton plantations. Salsbury also offered pecuniary incentives, including bonuses and prizes for cotton picked before Christmas and even clearing tenants' debts to keep them from running off when their accounts rose too high in particularly bad crop years. Though counterintuitive, he apparently viewed tenant debt as more of a liability than an asset to the ultimate goal of maintaining labor stability.

Tenants' health care was of primary concern as well. At a cost of \$20,000, DPL constructed the first and only plantation hospital in the region (Owens 1922). It was staffed by two doctors, nurses, assistants, a diet cook, and orderlies, and it was serviced by a plantation ambulance adapted from an old Ford truck (Smith 1923: 71). The hospital reported considerable success in reducing malaria, pellagra, and other diseases that incapacitated the workforce, though management policed tenants' hospital access by insisting that "doctors should always require an order from the manager . . . before examining or treating any negro" (DPL Company Records, box 13, folder 1921, managers' meeting minutes, August 5, 1921, 22). With its seeming aversion to violence and coercion and its paternalistic investment in improving black domestic life and health care, DPL was touted by one contemporaneous writer as "an almost Utopian dream being brought into an actual, practical reality" that "enabled thousands of the negro race to grow cotton under conditions which mean comfort, success and happiness for them, as well as for the company" (*Manufacturer's Record* 1923: 103). This welfare capitalism, however seemingly benevolent, was in fact self-interested and rooted in a racial capitalist logic of producing docile, immobile bodies. Ideologically, then, the corporate plantation was only marginally distinguishable from its antebellum predecessor. Nevertheless, black tenants exploited this aperture to build a range of fraternal, religious, and educational institutions that enabled their social, political, and economic advancement.

A Corporate Plantation Reading Public: Ad Wimbs, the *Cotton Farmer*, and Black Agrarian Futures

Establishing the *Cotton Farmer* was an integral part of DPL's welfare program. When Wimbs approached Quinn about establishing a plantation newspaper, Quinn "recommended to the executives that we give it a try" (Quinn Papers, folder 7). Salsbury and Fox, DPL's executive

and general managers, respectively, agreed to support the endeavor, Quinn recalls, “provided that I would quietly [*sic*] supervise the news content and editorials” (Quinn Papers, folder 7). Though a “somewhat time consuming” endeavor, Quinn found that overseeing the paper’s content “was most interesting because Ad Wimbs was a good common sense writer” (Quinn Papers, folder 7). In his monthly plantation managers’ meetings, Salsbury routinely promoted the paper as “a valuable instrument” to the company (DPL Company Records, box 13, folder 1921, managers’ meeting minutes, December 2, 1921; box 1, folder 1, annual report, 1921, 8–9). Though the paper consistently operated at a financial loss, he implored managers to ensure that it was delivered to every tenant regularly, because “we believe it has been one of the most valuable assets in *handling the labor situation* that we have ever had” (DPL Company Records, box 1, folders 1 and 2, annual report, 1919; emphasis added). Though seemingly contrary to the company’s profit-driven imperative, DPL viewed this financial loss as a minor liability, an investment that would surely pay future dividends by keeping black tenants working. The *Cotton Farmer* was thus regarded as an extension of DPL’s strategy of surveillance and social control over its putatively unmanageable and fugitive black labor force. It therefore represents racial capitalism’s rapacious and even cannibalistic insistence on reproducing itself at all costs, exploiting and undermining one of the very tenets of liberal humanism—literacy as an emblem of freedom and subjecthood—to maintain the racial order of things.

Despite management’s insidious intentions, however, the *Cotton Farmer* provides a rare glimpse at black tenant farmers in the Jim Crow South engaged in a reading and writing public. As Detweiler (1922: 13–14) observed in his study of the black press in the United States, the newspaper was generally “an adjunct of city life,” because “in the city one must be able to read constantly.” The *Cotton Farmer*, however, disrupts this rural/urban dichotomy by enabling a black reading and writing economy that foregrounded the unique concerns of black agricultural workers and their rural milieu. Staffed by a committee of tenant-reporters from each plantation, it was distributed every Saturday, and tenants paid an annual subscription fee of about \$5 (Smith 1923; Quinn Papers, folder 7). The paper’s masthead depicts a drawing of a farmer pushing a plow hitched to a mule, framed by ears of corn on the left and bales of cotton on the right. The motto, “Labor overcomes all things—everybody work,” is printed just below

THE COTTON FARMER

PUBLISHED BY THE COLORED TENANTS OF DELTA AND PINE LAND CO., REV. AD WILMS, EDITOR

MOTTO: LABOR OVERCOMES ALL THINGS—EVERYBODY WORK

VOLUME EIGHT
SCOTT, BOLIVAR COUNTY, MISS., SATURDAY FEBRUARY 5, 1927
No. 8

GRATEFUL LETTER

Scott, Miss., Jan. 30th, 1927.
Dear Editor:
Please allow me again to thank the Cotton Farmer and its readers for the good consideration for those two fine letters from the President and from the General Manager, the first thing I read to my mind. It is one of the things that the Negro cotton farmer in the world thought of and writes each succeeding week, trying to tell us in so far as we are of anything, our feeling back. If it is my heart right every year and of that kind to me, when I was thinking my heart would have never been what it is now. I want to say that those two fine great white letters, I pray their names will be remembered in all their glory. When I read the Big Show's letter it read on my heart and there my eyes closed and I began to read that.

The subscription money for the cotton plantation, such as the Plantation Hospital. Those that receive the attention of our doctors and the attention of nurses, the safety and the dignity. This is quite a forward step for the Negro. We are so grateful. So please, in the present.

THE TENANTS' RESPONSE

Dear Editor:
Please allow me to say my grateful acknowledgment of receipt of the letter from the President and the General Manager of the Company (Scott's) and the letter from the Big Show, calling for some more from them, calling for their better help. To have the president say that we "WANT CREDIT" is quite something. It is true we take it for granted that he will supply the "NECESSARY" means to "CARRY ON". So many friends from near and far, some are that there is much to be done. We are not sure of the cotton. We are not sure of the management, and the General Manager says we have a right to expect improvement by fall. I can not see the necessity of such a statement as "WANTY" CREDIT.

The Manufacturers Record

The Editor of The Cotton Farmer is invited to the Editor of the Southern Home for making its line on the first class goods. The January 1927 and the issue of the Big Show is used for that great constructive talker of the South. THE MANUFACTURERS RECORD. We have good talk money with our history, particularly the article by Mr. L. S. Crosby of Princeton, on "HOW MISSISSIPPI RECORDS WITH THE WILSONS FOR FARM STABILITY" and also the article of Mrs. W. B. Roberts of Houston, on "ADVERTISING PAPER ON RAINY COTTON HARVESTS AND LINGERING CONFUSION OF CERTAIN COUNTRIES". When the Department in the cotton line the cotton products factory goods are not had over and all kinds of methods, etc.

Figure 1 Masthead of the sole extant issue of the *Cotton Farmer*, February 5, 1927

the heading, perhaps a nod to the “dignity of labor” mantra espoused by Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee school of racial uplift or the company’s constant anxiety over recruiting and retaining laborers (see fig. 1). The content primarily covered local news from DPL’s plantations, including letters from tenants about deaths and burials, the credit system, and the vagaries of agrarian life.

It also included global news and sermons; announcements about local baseball competitions, Saturday night parties, and baptisms; and classified ads publicizing the activities of the plantations’ approximately thirty-one churches and numerous fraternal organizations and mutual aid societies. The paper “used many pictures,” Quinn recalls, and tenants happily paid “\$2 for a cut” to get their “picture in the paper” (Quinn Papers, folder 7). The sole extant issue includes an ad for Dr. Fred Palmer’s skin-lightening cream, photographs of the plantation hospital and ambulance, and the portrait of Reverend Brown, or “Jamaica,” cited above. Like the blues, then, the *Cotton Farmer* was a record of black social life in the “new” cotton South.

Though financially supported and surveilled by the company, the *Cotton Farmer* was still a medium in which tenants could express their grievances and disagreements with management. In a letter to the editor, a tenant addressed the managers’ complaints about the problem of tenants fleeing the plantation and defaulting on their

accounts. "When from sheer want a man gets up and moves away," he writes, "he should not be called a debt dodger. The weak ones that the General Manager spoke of will fall out, but many strong ones are being forced out" (*Cotton Farmer* 1927b). Reverend Brown, for instance, is reported to have left in search of a more favorable labor arrangement and autonomy over his cotton crop. "He worked on the halves but he wanted to work the same land on the fourths," Wimbs writes, "and for that cause he left as he considered himself financially able to change his method of cropping" (*Cotton Farmer* 1927a).⁷ Read alongside Salsbury's anxiety over recruiting and retaining laborers and preventing them from fleeing and defaulting on their accounts, this tenant's letter and Brown's departure suggest that conditions at DPL were (obviously) not as utopian as they were made out to be and that tenants retained at least some agency over their labor and mobility despite DPL's attempts at constant supervision and control.

Wimbs possessed a rather paradoxical political philosophy that straddled the proverbial and often overdetermined accommodation-resistance binary. Hailing from Greensboro, Alabama, he was a successful businessman, minister, and politician. An active member of the Alabama Republican Party, he was an advocate for black suffrage and even ran for governor (1902) and lieutenant governor (1906) of Alabama (the first black man to do so, in fact) before moving to the delta in the late 1910s. An associate of Booker T. Washington, he took a conciliatory stance on race relations and vehemently discouraged urban and northern migration. He insisted "our people" are "cotton and corn raisers and ill adapted to the axacting [*sic*] life of the steel mills, coal mines, blast furnaces . . . and the strenuous life incident to the grind of the large cities" (quoted in *New Journal and Guide* 1923). Therefore, "the average man that remains on the cotton farms in the long run will be better off." Wimbs further warned, "Our people especially had better get it out of our heads that we can earn a living by idlesome doings and sharp practices." Rather, with its "reasonable credit prices" (quoted in *Manufacturer's Record* 1923: 105), he maintained, DPL provided a viable alternative to northern migration; thus, he cautioned black farmers that they had "better look well before you leap" (quoted in *New Journal and Guide* 1923).

Despite the widespread abuses of sharecropping and tenant farming, Wimbs was not anomalous in promoting an agrarian future based on cotton farming. In the early twentieth century, 36 percent of

African Americans still worked as farmers (Rolinson 2007: 71), and there remained considerable debate in the black public sphere about the wisdom of migrating to the US North for industrial jobs. As late as 1935, Kelly Miller (1935: 21), a Howard University sociology professor and contributor to *The New Negro* (1925), the ur-text of the Harlem Renaissance, observed, “Nowhere has the Negro thriven in numbers outside of the cotton growing states and parts of states,” suggesting that most African Americans were better off in the rural, agrarian South. Thus, Wimbs’s regional bias would have been consistent with popular strains of black thought that insisted on the US South’s viability for self-determination and racial uplift.

Though the *Cotton Farmer* was, like the blues, a record of black social life, its ideological stance departs significantly from Woods’s (2017: 16, 25) conceptualization of “the blues epistemology” as a mode of resistance to the plantation regime. Rather, it promoted a more accommodating racial philosophy. Detweiler (1922: 193) describes the *Cotton Farmer* as a “unique publication” invested in racial reconciliation and “lessening the race conflict.” “The syndicate [DPL] under which the tenants work is praised,” he observes. “White people are mentioned with gratitude.” Quoting directly from the paper, Detweiler further notes: “Someone writes, ‘The Syndicate certainly looks out for the welfare of each and every tenant regardless of circumstances. It is a real father and mother to the tenantry’” (193). In “Welfare Work on America’s Largest Cotton Plantation,” a 1923 photo-essay devoted to DPL’s black tenants, Wimbs is quoted making a similar nod of approval toward the company’s paternalism: “Under the persuasive influence of the white people, peace among my people has been so improved that now serious disagreements are but few” (quoted in *Manufacturer’s Record* 1923: 106). He also supplied a letter for the essay describing the conditions of black life at DPL and a host of photographs featuring children, a kindergarten and home economics teacher, ministers, foremen, churches, the plantation hospital, and tenants enjoying an annual plantation dinner. A caption accompanying the children’s photographs reads: “The reader will note the alert expression on the faces of the children and their general air of happiness and contentment” (103). The emphasis on children mirrors contemporaneous efforts by the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine, which published an annual children’s issue to demonstrate racial vitality and to refute eugenicist claims about diseased black bodies and impending racial extinction.

The author(s) of the photo-essay assure readers, “The legends under all of these pictures are exactly as we found them on the photograph,” and were likely written by Wimbs himself (106). Through these images and their captions, Wimbs and the author(s) sought to construct a visual narrative of black southerners thriving on the corporate plantation: “A close observation of these photographs,” the author(s) believed, “will clearly reveal the look of happiness, contentment and satisfaction that appears on the faces of every one of the tenants” (105). What these images actually reveal, of course, is the performance of accommodating corporate plantation management and discipline.

It is unclear if Wimbs was in earnest in his seeming enthusiasm for white paternalism or if he simply viewed DPL as a lesser and necessary evil during a period of intensifying racial violence and socioeconomic dispossession. Whatever the case, he was well aware of the challenges black southerners faced and worked diligently for their political and institutional advancement. In particular, he believed black newspapers were “one of the most powerful agencies” in the struggle for racial uplift, because the “history of the progress of the race” was often omitted from mainstream white newspapers. It was the duty of “Negro newspapers,” then, “to tell of Negroes buying land, building good homes, erecting nice churches and schools, educating their children, living clean and sober lives, and doing many other helpful and encouraging things” (*Cotton Farmer* 1923).⁸ To this end, he used his leadership and influence at the *Cotton Farmer* to urge DPL to erect the hospital and a host of “other educational and social facilities[,] . . . which had not been thought of until he sponsored them through his sheet” (Taylor 1935).

Unlike the antebellum plantation, where unfreedom was contingent on illiteracy, DPL promoted basic education as integral to cultivating a productive labor force. Partnering with local public school systems, they established an elementary school on each plantation, a night school, and in 1922 reportedly committed \$20,000 toward building a vocational school with courses in agricultural science, elementary mechanics, domestic science, woodwork, and “a library for the negro [*sic*] tenants” (Owens 1922). Oscar Johnston, who succeeded Salisbury as executive manager following the flood, noted his preference for “deal[ing] with a tenant who can read and write and keep his own accounts; for, if intelligent, it is easier to get along and no suspicion arises as to whether he is being cheated” (Walton 1929). However,

Johnston was also flagrantly paternalistic toward tenants, proudly describing his management style as “*in loco parentis*” (Nelson 1984: 233–34). While giving black people access to literacy and education was no longer incompatible with the logics of white supremacy, Johnston intimated, it did not translate to social equality.

Alongside formal schooling, the *Cotton Farmer* itself would have certainly been a laboratory for cultivating tenant literacy. Detweiler (1922: 12) speculated that “the drop in the percentage of illiteracy [among African Americans] from 30.4 in 1910 to 22.9 in 1920 is due to the spread of newspaper circulation”; thus, the black press played “an important part in the process of educating a race” (51). The question of literacy is relative and contingent, however. “Some may be readers of the paper and yet be very slightly blessed with education,” Detweiler observed. “Letters come into the newspaper offices so poorly spelled and written that they are hard to interpret” (8). Given the limited educational opportunities in the delta, the *Cotton Farmer* was undoubtedly a space of uneven literacies, where black sharecroppers and tenant farmers experimented with reading and writing, their grammatical errors and misspellings the tangible evidence of the hard-won transition from slavery to freedom and the forging of a modern black reading public in the afterlife of the plantation. Ultimately, DPL’s investment in black social and educational enterprises, however modest and self-interested, seems to have buttressed Wimbs’s belief that it provided a viable agrarian future for black southerners, hence his opposition to northern migration. “Where one can get a good cropper’s credit, good houses to live in, good land to work, opportunities to give his or her children the chance to learn to read, write and figure, and become an expert cotton producer, and the protection of life,” Wimbs reasoned, “it would be well to avail themselves of the opportunity, before that door of opportunity is closed” (quoted in *Manufacturer’s Record* 1922).

The strange case of DPL and the *Cotton Farmer* presents a paradox for the history of race, labor, and literacy in the Jim Crow South. Through welfare capitalism, DPL seemingly took a comparatively less exploitative approach to managing tenants, providing improved living conditions, health care, and education, while limiting physical violence and coercion. However, it still operated under the racial capitalist logics of Jim Crow segregation, white paternalism, surveillance, and social control, thus counteracting any simplistic assessment of

the company as a radical departure from the exploitative labor practices typically associated with sharecropping and tenant farming. The *Cotton Farmer* epitomizes this paradox. On the one hand, it represents a rare instance of black institution building, whereby Wimbs and his team of tenant-editors produced a vibrant reading and writing public under a biopolitical regime that derived from plantation slavery. Yet, it also demonstrates racial capitalism's wily and protean capacity to adapt itself and persist under new socioeconomic conditions. On the corporate plantation, even literacy and education—constitutive to the projects of freedom and liberal subjecthood—could be coopted to prolong colonial and antebellum plantation logics.

In 1926 three copies of the *Cotton Farmer* reached an UFCO banana plantation worker and Garveyite in Bocas del Toro, Panama, adding a transnational dimension to this already anomalous and largely local black reading public. Like the delta, Bocas del Toro was a New Negro enclave organized by the corporate plantation and populated by migrants in search of better economic opportunities. While scholars have tended to study these regions and the companies that colonized them independently, the *Cotton Farmer* serves as a literal and figural link between DPL and UFCO as similar biopolitical institutions and afterlives of the plantation in the hemisphere. Most importantly, it reveals the global black south as a dynamic black geography, wherein sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and migrant laborers forged diasporic ties and articulated geopolitical knowledges within and against corporate plantation hegemony.

The Corporate Plantation in the Global Black South: Producing Docile Bodies

In “The Biggest Cotton Plantation in the World: Another Romance of Achievement,” a feature article in the *Durham (NC) Morning Herald*, Clarence J. Owens touted DPL as “a principality or empire in itself.” Spanning Bolivar and Washington Counties, DPL was a monument to the eponymous heroes who “liberated” the hemisphere from European control. Bolivar County, Owens (1922) writes, “named for the heroic leader who is referred to as ‘The Washington of South America,’ is immediately adjacent to the county which bears the name of ‘The Father of Our Country.’ Thus [George] Washington and [Simón] Bolivar, at the point of whose swords the independence of a hemisphere was won, have enduring monuments to perpetuate their memory,

in these counties that stand through the providence of God as high examples of economic independence.” Owens’s hagiographic evocation of Washington and Bolivar interpolates the Mississippi delta into a hemispheric cartography and a Pan-American mythology of republican leaders courageously wresting independence from European powers. This alleged liberation, of course, depended on the continuation of unfreedom and dispossession for black and indigenous peoples, ultimately reproducing the very inequities it claimed to abolish and thus undermining the larger project of freedom. Lauding DPL as “a principality or empire in itself,” Owens (1922) unwittingly captured this ironic inextricability of freedom and empire and, more specifically, located the corporate plantation squarely within the history of settler colonialism and imperialism in the hemisphere.

Indeed, the rise of the corporate plantation in the postbellum US South was coterminous with European and US imperial efforts throughout the global south. Industrial capitalists’ colonization of the delta’s alluvial empire in the late nineteenth century (such as DPL) “mirrored the expansion of western capital into the colonial world at this time, as the imperial powers launched the wealth gained from the industrial revolution into their colonies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, creating export economies based on extractive industrial and agricultural products—and employing various forms of coerced labor to produce the crops and to work in the mines and the mills” (Woodruff 2012: 9). A similar practice was afoot in the Caribbean and Latin America, whereby private enterprises such as UFCO practiced what Jason M. Colby (2006: 599) calls “corporate colonialism,” that is, forging an agricultural empire by assuming “direct foreign control over production and labor in a host society.” The expansionist logics and extractive practices undergirding the rise of the corporate plantation in the Mississippi delta were thus inextricably linked to US imperial and European colonial efforts in the Caribbean and Latin America.

Like the delta’s cotton economy, Bocas del Toro’s banana industry came into formation through foreign capital investment and black (and indigenous) labor. Once a vast expanse “of poorly drained insect- and snake-ridden tropical rain forest,” UFCO “converted [the region] into one of the most productive banana farms in Latin America” (Bourgois 1989: 3). Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Afro-Caribbean workers initially migrated to the area to construct the Panama railroad and the Panama Canal, forming a New Negro enclave that, as Jennifer

Brittan (2013) observes, represented a black culture capital in Central America alongside more recognizable cities such as Harlem and Paris. Afro-Caribbean migrants were pushed by debilitating hunger and poverty after the collapse of the sugar industry in the British West Indies and pulled by the promise of better economic conditions, able to make in one hour on an UFCO labor contract what they made in one day back home. Like their counterparts in the Mississippi delta, Afro-Caribbean laborers endured debilitating health conditions clearing Panama's jungles and, as Philippe Bourgois (1989: 51) notes, "exceptionally rigid plantation labor discipline."

In this way, according to Gary Helm Darden (2009: 8), the "era of codified racial supremacy in the American South tied the region in many important ways to the theory and global practice of colonial imperialism." This was especially apparent in DPL's and UFCO's managerial techniques, whereby both companies deployed Jim Crow (or some derivation of it) to govern their nonwhite employees. Jim Crow had already been exported to Central America during the construction of the Panama Canal and to the Caribbean through the US occupation of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. As a US company already fluent in Jim Crow grammars and logics, then, UFCO simply extended US imperial practices to its banana enclaves through racially segregated facilities (schools, hospitals, etc.) and exploitative labor techniques. Whereas colonialism and imperialism in the Caribbean and Latin America and Jim Crow in the United States are rightly viewed as divergent afterlives of slavery and the plantation, the similarities between DPL's and UFCO's management practices and disciplinary techniques suggest that the corporate plantation was a subject-making institution that produced similar conditions of black life throughout the hemisphere.

For instance, UFCO management promoted a "strategy of keeping workers in debt in order to keep them working" (Harpelle 2003: 57). The company "extended credit to workers in order to 'hold the man on the job,'" which left "the majority of farm labourers . . . 'continuously slightly' indebted to United Fruit. Moreover, the company combined the credit system with the 'ever present threat of blacklisting' to 'stabilize' the labour force and to 'prevent promiscuous migration from farm to farm'" (57), just as DPL worked to restrict black mobility in the delta. Like cotton, "banana production required a reliable workforce and United Fruit was not opposed to using coercive means to

achieve its goals” (57). Furthermore, laborers in both parts of the hemisphere faced harrowing health conditions as they cleared wildernesses, drained swamps, and cultivated plantations (Nelson 1999; Bourgois 1989). Though DPL reputedly took a less malicious approach to managing its workforce than UFCO, both firms deployed techniques of surveillance and social control to maximize production. On these corporate plantations, then, Jim Crow functioned as a technology of colonialism and imperialism—what some scholars have termed “Jim Crow colonialism”—that sought to discipline and immobilize employees (Colby 2006; Darden 2009). To be sure, there were important distinctions between DPL and UFCO, including company size and scale, commodities produced, labor processes, and degree of company influence and control over local governments; still, their shared managerial techniques aimed to produce similar kinds of docile bodies and thus demonstrate how the corporate plantation functioned as a racial capitalist and biopolitical regime across the Americas.

Sharecropper and Tenant Farmer Transnationalism: Garveyism, Print Culture, and Labor Migration

While the corporate plantation provides one way of mapping the contours of the global black south from above—linking the Mississippi delta and Bocas del Toro through similar and coterminous histories of colonization and labor management—black laborers often worked within and against these paternal, neocolonial, and imperial structures to articulate their own geopolitical knowledges and diasporic practices. The *Cotton Farmer’s* transnational circulation exemplifies how black agricultural workers appropriated hegemonic commercial and political networks to forge a black hemispheric geography from below. Furthermore, as Christopher Taylor (2012: 86) observes in his comparative analysis of sharecropper resistance in Tobago and the Missouri Bootheel, sharecropping existed as an “economic form” across the “postemancipation Americas” that “generated a form of political knowledge that can be set to work an ocean away” (92). Beyond Jim Crow and the corporate plantation, then, I propose the global black south as a circuit for the production and transmission of such political knowledge—what might be called a “sharecropper and tenant farmer transnationalism”—through print culture, labor migration, and political organizing.

On January 15, 1927, Wimbs received correspondence from John J. Smith of Shepard Island, Bocas del Toro, requesting a subscription to the *Cotton Farmer*:

Sirs: As a matter of courtesy, I have to acknowledge your very appreciative paper the "COTTON FARMER," viz: issues 16th Oct. and 30th, Oct., and 7th Nov. I presume you solicit my patronage as a subscriber. In reply beg to say, I have no objection to be a subscriber. You may continue the supply regularly. It is not financially convenient (right now) to send you the advance subscription, but will do so at a very early future, about next month.

I notice your columns are very replete with good information and instruction. Should you take job printing, you may send me your list of rates, etc. (*Cotton Farmer* 1927a)

Surprised that his local plantation newspaper had reached an international audience, Wimbs rightly speculated that it had traveled to Panama "on account of its attitude towards Marcus Garvey" (*Cotton Farmer* 1927a). Smith was indeed an active and devoted Garveyite. Before relocating to Bocas del Toro, he served as general secretary of a UNIA chapter on Farm 5, an UFCO plantation in Base Line, Panama, and he contributed at least three poems to the *Negro World* and an essay on why he became a Garveyite. A movement originally conceived in opposition to the exploitative labor practices Garvey witnessed on UFCO's Central American fruit plantations, Garveyism was an important mechanism for producing and transmitting black geopolitical knowledges throughout the hemisphere and the broader diaspora. Like the corporate plantation, the Garvey movement had a stronghold in both Central America's Afro-Caribbean enclaves and the Mississippi delta. In the 1920s there were seventeen UNIA divisions in Bolivar County, Mississippi, the most of any county in the United States, and forty-seven UNIA branches in Panama, many of which were in the Bocas del Toro region (Rolinson 2007: 109; Harpelle 2000: 6). Thus Garveyism's widespread popularity in the delta and Panama suggests that black agricultural workers in the two regions would have likely shared similar political and ideological commitments.

Wimbs's editorial activities offer further evidence of how Garveyism may have facilitated the *Cotton Farmer's* transnational reach and its appeal to readers in Bocas del Toro and other Garveyite enclaves.

By maintaining a regular exchange with other newspaper offices, Wimbs's editorials were republished in several contemporaneous periodicals, including the *Negro World* (Smith 1923: 72). While Wimbs disagreed with the back-to-Africa component of Garvey's political philosophy, he remained sympathetic to Garvey's cause and frequently celebrated him as a superior organizer in the paper. And though DPL's management supervised the *Cotton Farmer's* content, black delta residents were often avid readers of northern black newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Negro World*; therefore, efforts to suppress Wimbs's engagement with Garvey's political views would have been futile. Most importantly, T. Thomas Fortune, Wimbs's friend and colleague who served as editor of the *Negro World* from 1923 until his death in 1928, often republished Wimbs's pro-Garvey editorials. In a 1924 article in the *Cotton Farmer* (subsequently republished in the *Negro World* [1924]), Wimbs compared Garvey's persecution to that of Booker T. Washington's: "We know one thing, and that is, the same element pursuing Garvey to his persecution and desired death is the same element that pursued Booker Washington to the brink of his grave, and even now throws black ink on his monument." Wimbs would continue to advocate for Garvey in the *Cotton Farmer* throughout the early to mid-1920s, including penning a fiery article casting doubt on the weight of the mail fraud charges brought against Garvey for the Black Star Line debacle and imploring President Calvin Coolidge to pardon him (*Negro World* 1925). In turn, Fortune periodically quoted Wimbs in the *Negro World* and even published an article recruiting readers to seek employment on DPL's plantations (which may account for Reverend Brown's employment there).

In contrast to his more sycophantic and pro-paternalistic positions limned above, Wimbs's defenses of Garvey unequivocally promoted black self-determination. "One thing about Garvey and his gang, they are not fussing with white folks in an effort to associate with them," Wimbs writes. "They are not with hat in hand begging the white folks for money for them to have a 'talking meeting' to save the race, and they are not fussing with the white folks about the white man's ships, but were trying to have a ship of their own even if he failed" (*Negro World* 1925). Wimbs further maintained, "If Marcus [Garvey] believe [*sic*] his plan is all right to solve what is popularly called the Negro problem in the United States and for that matter in the world, why not

let him have a free rein?" (Wimbs 1927). Such a sympathetic attitude toward Garvey's right to self-determination seems to contrast significantly with Wimbs's position that DPL's black tenant farmers benefited from being "under the persuasive influence of the white people" (*Manufacturer's Record* 1923: 106). And yet, there is no evidence that he ever joined one of Bolivar County's numerous UNIA divisions; rather, he maintained that Garvey "was and is mistaken in the remedy for the ills . . . with which our race is afflicted" (*Negro World* 1925) and reminded readers, "We believe we have here 18 plantations of fine opportunities for our people and that there is no need of going to Africa" (*Cotton Farmer* 1927a). Ultimately, Wimbs seems to have taken a contradictory stance on black political futures, lingering between embracing accommodation and white paternalism on the corporate plantation, on one hand, and supporting Garvey's efforts at black self-determination, on the other, at least in principle. Notably, Garvey, too, had a checkered history of accommodating white supremacy, infamously meeting with the grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in 1922 and receiving regular contributions from UFCO administrators for the UNIA, despite the company's consistent mistreatment of its Afro-Caribbean employees (Harold 2007; Rolinson 2007; Harpelle 2000: 10). Such contradictory positions suggest that the global black south encompassed a range of often-competing ideological commitments and political strategies as laborers and organizers navigated the murky waters of global capitalism and white supremacy in the plantation's precarious afterlife.

Just as Garveyism would have undergirded Smith's political and ideological affiliation with the *Cotton Farmer*, it is also the most likely conduit for the paper's hemispheric circulation. An avid reader of and contributor to the *Negro World*, John J. Smith may have encountered Wimbs's editorials as early as 1923, when *Fortune* began republishing his pro-Garvey writings. However, in his letter to Wimbs, Smith acknowledged that he received three hard copies of the *Cotton Farmer*, indicating its physical migration from the delta to Panama. Despite the *Cotton Farmer's* modest paid circulation, early twentieth-century black newspapers often "passed from hand to hand, especially in the South" (Detweiler 1922: 7), and each paper sold reportedly had an "average of five readers" (11). This informal practice of periodical circulation would have surely increased the *Cotton Farmer's* readership beyond DPL's eighteen plantations and likely accounts for how

it reached Panama, much like the *Negro World*. According to Colin Grant (2008: 148), “The traffic between Harlem and the Caribbean and the West Indian enclaves of Costa Rica and Panama was non-stop,” so “Garvey relied on the willingness of merchant seamen to act as informal agents for the *Negro World*, carrying bundles of the paper from port to port” and “successfully distribut[ing]” them throughout the region. Traveling alongside the *Negro World*, then, the *Cotton Farmer* circulated within the transnational network of periodical exchange that Lara Putnam (2013: 124) calls the “circum-Caribbean/transatlantic black press.” This counterpublic, which extended across the Americas, was central to early twentieth-century black diasporic political organizing. In Central America, Afro-Caribbean migrants, many of whom hailed from the British West Indies, established and circulated newspapers such as the *Central American Express* and the *Workman* that, much like the *Cotton Farmer*, served as a record of black social life in the bowels of global capitalism. Unlike black southerners in the delta, however, British West Indian migrants had some of the highest literacy rates among “colonial subjects anywhere in the interwar world . . . approach[ing] those of Boston, New York, and other metropolises of the Anglophone world” (128). They often subscribed to African American newspapers as well, including the *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Crisis*, and *Opportunity*; thus, even if the *Cotton Farmer*’s circulation to Bocas del Toro was singular, Afro-Caribbean migrants were reading many of the same periodicals as their counterparts in the delta. Despite residing in different parts of the hemisphere and being differently literate, then, Afro-Caribbean and African American corporate plantation laborers were a part of the same transnational reading public. Savvily appropriating commercial shipping and trade networks to transport newspapers, they forged their own transnational geographies to keep abreast of the changing sociopolitical landscape of the diaspora as they became increasingly aware of their shared conditions under colonialism, imperialism, and Jim Crow (Putnam 2013).

This hemispheric periodical circulation, as Grant observes, was coterminous with transnational labor traffic. Scholarship on Afro-Caribbean labor migration in the interwar period tends to focus on movement to Central America and New York or intra-Caribbean migrations (Putnam 2013; Stephens 2005; Brittan 2013; Puri 2003). However, the *Cotton Farmer* suggests that the US South was a part of

this labor circuit as well, hence Reverend Brown's migration from Jamaica to Mississippi. This movement and meeting up of workers from different parts of the hemisphere enabled not only the spread of newspapers but also the cultivation of a political consciousness around labor rights. Extant correspondence between UFCO administrators reveals that workers traveling between Mobile and Bocas del Toro, for instance, were often engaged in labor activism. One such memo requests that an administrator "quit signing on negro crew at Bocas and bringing them to Mobile, or permitting crews from his ship to be signed off at Bocas. They are carrying on regular labor traffic," he complains, "and causing unrest among our laborers at Bocas, by reason of injecting labor unionism into their heads."⁹ By transporting and disseminating political knowledge between the US South and Central America, these corporate plantation laborers produced a subaltern geography that reconfigured the capitalist and biopolitical aims of corporate plantation cartographies. Whereas UFCO's primary concern was the effective transportation of plantation commodities and tourism—as evinced by the countless maps they produced to visualize their shipping and tourist routes (see fig. 2)—black laborers, many of them Garveyites, coopted these networks to spread ideas about racial uplift and self-determination and to agitate for better working conditions. Through Garveyism, print culture, and labor migration, the global black south comes into focus as a dynamic black geography wherein laborers enacted a sharecropper and tenant farmer transnationalism that contradicted corporate plantation logics. Thus, the *Cotton Farmer* broadens the cartography of early twentieth-century black diasporic practice by centering the literary, cultural, and political activities of black workers in the rural plantation regions of the Americas.

Cotton Geopolitics and Black Hemispheric Imaginaries

Though Wimbs qualified his support for Garvey's African repatriation scheme by reasserting his commitment to DPL's local, corporate plantation infrastructure, his editorials on the geopolitical economy of the cotton industry suggest that he, too, was a transnational thinker. Coincidentally, they also articulate a hemispheric imaginary that, quite presciently, maps the *Cotton Farmer's* potential trajectory from

Let us ship from Galveston, New Orleans and Mobile direct to the spinners; and then instead of our cotton going to Germany for manufacturer [*sic*] and shipped to South America, let us spin it here in the South and ship it to the South American markets. . . . We have a product the whole world needs and must have. It would be an amazing pity to allow plutocrat financial cornerers [*sic*] to so manipulate the government agencies as to confiscate our crop. (*Cotton Farmer* 1921a)

Wimbs's hemispheric imaginary reroutes the geopolitical economy of the southern cotton industry from Europe to the circuits of the global black south. Proposing to link southern port cities—such as New Orleans and Mobile, which, incidentally, were also major banana ports and Garveyite enclaves—to South America via trade, Wimbs sought to transform the Mississippi delta into an international hub not only for cotton production but for manufacturing and shipping as well. Though obviously pro-capitalist, it was no more so than Garvey's numerous schemes for black commercial development. In fact, Wimbs's hemispheric imaginary would have certainly appealed to southern Garveyites, most of whom worked in agriculture. At the 1924 UNIA convention, for instance, Isaac Chambers, president of the New Orleans division, proposed organizing "cooperatives to empower black sharecroppers in the rural South," where "cotton and other produce of the Negro could be bought, thereby preventing white capitalists from obtaining this produce at a ridiculously low figure, as was the case at present to the undoing of the farmer" (quoted in Harold 2007: 46). Significantly, Wimbs's commentary would have also enlarged the worldview of the *Cotton Farmer's* readership. While it may seem unusual that black tenant farmers would have concerned themselves with the geopolitics of the cotton industry, especially given their limited education and often precarious living conditions under Jim Crow, their lives were in fact dictated by the vagaries and whims of the international cotton market. More than mere farmhands or a lumpenproletariat bereft of a sophisticated understanding of global markets, they would have at least had a rudimentary interest in and knowledge of cotton geopolitics and their place within this world industry.

Finally, Wimbs's editorials portended the *Cotton Farmer's* possible trajectory to Panama, mapping a hemispheric periodical circulation

route that, unlike the *Negro World*, did not travel through Harlem. “There is no sane reason why Greenville [Mississippi] should not be dotted with textile mills to spin and weave the cotton crop of its territory,” he writes. “There we have the great Mississippi, the father of waters to carry the finished products to Mexican and South American ports” (*Cotton Farmer* 1921b). Given that DPL’s properties sat along the Mississippi River for several miles, it would have been the most direct route by which the *Cotton Farmer* traveled to Bocas del Toro: down the Mississippi, through New Orleans, and on to Panama, likely aboard an UFCO steamship. Located at the mouth of the Mississippi, New Orleans was a “crucial geographical gateway between the Americas” (Gruesz 2001: 121). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the most important US city for shipping, trade, and print culture—including importing bananas and exporting cotton—and the Snyder Banana Company, acquired by UFCO in the 1890s, had a direct trade route between Bocas del Toro and New Orleans and Mobile (Gruesz 2008; Adams 1914). New Orleans was also home to an array of black diasporic social and political organizations, including a vibrant Garveyite community and the West Indian Seaman’s Social, Benevolent, and Literary Association (Harold 2007; Harold 2013; Rolinson 2007). As the South’s largest city and the locus of such dynamic global black south activity, New Orleans was almost certainly the crossroad linking the delta and Panama. Ultimately, by promoting a direct trade route between the delta and South America, Wimbs reveals how black agricultural workers actively negotiated and participated in transnational geographies. They held a range of diverse and often competing ideological commitments, variously resisting, accommodating, and adapting racial capitalist infrastructures. Taken together with Garveyism, periodical circulation, and labor migration and activism, Wimbs’s hemispheric imaginary delineates sharecropper and tenant farmer transnationalism as a dynamic mode of black geopolitical practice and knowledge production.

The “strange career” of the *Cotton Farmer* presents the afterlife of the plantation in the global black south as a theoretical and methodological intervention within black transnational and diaspora studies. This obscure corporate plantation newspaper and its chance transnational circulation provide an alternative framework for interrogating

the history of race, labor, and literacy by positioning sharecroppers and tenant farmers as chief architects of black geographic thought and practice. Situated within the local, domestic context of the Jim Crow South, the *Cotton Farmer* illustrates how the corporate plantation at once conformed to and departed from its colonial and antebellum antecedents. Instead of racial violence, deception, and coercion, DPL crafted welfare capitalist policies that created comparatively better working and living conditions and educational opportunities for black tenants, hence, Wimbs's establishment of a corporate plantation reading public and his efforts to promote DPL as a viable agrarian future for black southerners. Yet, company policies were still governed by paternalism, social control, and other racial capitalist logics, enabling a circumscribed future at best. Thus, in the Jim Crow South, the *Cotton Farmer* represents a rare and impressive instance of black institution building in the midst of corporate self-interest and racial retrenchment, as the gains of New Negro enterprise and self-determination eroded into widespread violence, dispossession, and disfranchisement.

The *Cotton Farmer*'s transnational circulation, however, inserts delta sharecroppers and tenant farmers into the dynamic hemispheric networks of the global black south. Linking DPL and UFCO illuminates how the corporate plantation in the US South emerged coterminously with European and US imperialisms in the Caribbean and Latin America, as both enterprises marshaled Jim Crow to produce a docile labor force and further grease the wheels of global capitalism. The *Cotton Farmer*, however, undercuts this hegemonic geography, by circulating along the subaltern routes and "lower frequencies" crafted by black sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and migrant laborers. By appropriating and reimagining corporate shipping and trade routes, Wimbs, Smith, Brown, and their contemporaries ruptured the rural-urban and local-global dichotomies that tend to delimit black transnational and diaspora studies. Alongside artists and intellectuals in Harlem and other urban metropolises, the *Cotton Farmer* shows how black agricultural workers were engaged in a transnational reading and writing public—forging a sharecropper and tenant farmer transnationalism from below in the midst of new and ever-evolving modes of domination and social control in the afterlife of the plantation.

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Notes

- 1 There is a significant discrepancy regarding DPL's size and number of black employees. Owens (1922) says it had 65,000 acres under development and employed approximately "10,000 negroes [*sic*] and 300 white people." The *Cotton Farmer* (1927a) says it owned "about 35,000 acres [of] fertile land." Dong (1993: 30–31) states that by 1937, DPL "owned 38,000 acres of land . . . and employed 1,000 black sharecropper families or 3,300 working hands; of this total acreage, 11,700 acres were planted in cotton."
- 2 I am deeply indebted to Mary G. Rolinson for sharing her copy of the single extant issue of the *Cotton Farmer* with me, which she found mixed in with the Marcus Garvey papers at the National Archives. I would not have been able to write this essay without her generosity.
- 3 On the "afterlife of slavery," see Hartman 2007: 6.
- 4 The US South has always been global, emerging out of the violent global processes of settler colonialism and transatlantic slavery. In African American studies, however, it is typically considered local and provincial, while the urban US North, especially Harlem, is deemed the locus of black diasporic activity. The "global black south," then, aims to demonstrate how the US South has remained an important locus of black transnational activity and diasporic practice well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
- 5 The term New Negro, as I use it here, draws on recent scholarship that extends the New Negro era back into the nineteenth century and expands its geography beyond New York and the broader global north to encompass the US South, the Caribbean, and other parts of the black world. See Brittan 2013; Edwards 2003; Stephens 2005; Harold 2007, 2013; Briggs 2015; and Makalani 2013

- 6 These data may include the post-flood period, when the *Cotton Farmer* was defunct; contract renewal rates for the precise period of the paper's run are unavailable.
- 7 Working on "the halves" or "the fourths" refers to tenants' percentage of ownership and independence over their labor arrangement with the company (Nelson 1999: 95).
- 8 This was originally published in the *Mound Bayou Gazette* and republished in the *Cotton Farmer*. I interpret its republication as an endorsement by Wimbs and a reflection of his views on black newspapers.
- 9 This document, dated December 2, 1919, is located in Philippe Bourgois's personal, unpublished archive of UFCO business correspondence, which he discovered while conducting research in Bocas del Toro, Panama, in the 1980s. I am grateful to him for sharing his archive with me.

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