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Articulating Agrarian Racism

Statistics and Plantationist Empirics

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In this paper, I focus on the 1908 book Studies in the American Race Problem, a collection of essays by Mississippi planter Alfred Stone and Massachusetts statistician Walter Willcox, in order to examine the ways in which agricultural industrialization was articulated as a racial project in the early 20th century. Notions of development and competition in agriculture were closely tied to plantationist racial conceptions, and Studies in the American Race Problem evidences the articulation of white supremacist racial conceptions with liberal statistical practices which examined race as a population-level phenomenon. This agrarian epistemology, articulated as the interplay of individual racial deficiency and population-level demographics, provides evidence of an anti-Black investment in the notion of industry. Acknowledging anti-Blackness in the very genealogy of agro-industry, I suggest, provides a means to better understand subsequent agricultural development.

En este artículo, enfoco en el libro del año 1908, Estudios del problema racial en America, una colección de ensayos de Mississippi plantador Alfred Piedra y Massachusetts estadístico Walter Willcox, con el fin de examinar las formas en que la industrialización agrícola se articula como un proyecto racial a principios del siglo 20. Las nociones de desarrollo y competencia en la agricultura estaban estrechamente ligados a concepciones raciales plantacionistas, y Estudios del problema racial en America evidencia la articulación de concepciones raciales de los blancos

supremacistas con las prácticas estadísticas liberales que examinaron la raza como un fenómeno a nivel de población. Esta epistemología agraria, articulada como la interacción de deficiencia racial individual y demográficos a nivel de población, proporciona evidencia de una inversión anti-Negro en la noción de la industria. Reconociendo contra la negritud en el genealogía de la agroindustria, sugiero, proporciona un medio para comprender mejor el desarrollo agrícola posterior.

KEY WORDS: whiteness, agro-industry, Mississippi, plantations, Black farmers.

PALABRAS CLAVE: blancura, la agroindustria, Mississippi, plantaciones, agricultores negros.

INTRODUCTION

Located approximately 10 miles east of the Mississippi River, Stoneville is a bustling nexus of agricultural research and development. Though the village is small, it serves as a research center for industrial agriculture in Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas. The research complex has been a hub for agricultural science since 1905, when it was founded on land purchased by a group of planters led by Alfred Holt Stone (Bowman 1986, p 7). Even as Stone provided capital for the nascent Delta research station, he advocated for the development of agriculture as a proving ground

of white superiority in the Delta. In Stone's publications, collected in the 1908 volume *Studies in the American Race Problem*, he often referenced his own plantation in an attempt to bolster his claims of white agrarian superiority.

Stone's purported expertise on race reveals little about "the Negro in the Mississippi Delta" (Stone 1908, p 81)—rather, I contend that his frantic obsession with proving white supremacy in agriculture provides a glimpse of the white supremacist violence and anxiety underpinning early 20th century agricultural research and development. Stone's writings are animated by white fear of Black autonomy, and the multiple violences underpinning the plantation project are evident in his work. As Stone wrote, anti-vagrancy laws and threats of white violence were being used to reinforce the economic and political power of planters, which had been challenged by Black political and economic power gained after emancipation (Du Bois 1935, Willis 2000, Woodruff 2003).

Through a focus on *Studies in the American Race Problem*, I emphasize two key points. First, the industrialization of plantation agriculture was never an apolitical technical project, nor was its racially-uneven implementation merely a secondary consequence of the political economy of agriculture. Rather, in the early twentieth century, agricultural industrialization was embraced by planters like Stone in explicitly racial terms. Notions of "development" and "competition" in agriculture were tied to plantationist racial conceptions, and articulated around anti-Black conceptions of agricultural industry. Second, through statistical analysis, these concepts of "competition" and "industry"

were methodologized as population-level proofs of white superiority. Plantationist racial epistemologies, rather than being geographically and philosophically isolated, were in productive interaction with respected national statistical approaches to race and development. This confluence of racial ideologies sheds some light on the formative role that plantation racism had on US agricultural policy in subsequent decades, and particularly the pervasive discrimination against Black farmers. Stone's collaboration with prominent statistician Walter F. Willcox evidences the articulation of white supremacist racial conceptions with liberal statistical practices which methodologized race as a population-level phenomenon which bore evidence of individual racial differences. In *Studies of the American Race Problem*, the articulation of these two positions—the experiential claims of an avowed southern white supremacist and the supposedly dispassionate analysis of a North-eastern statistician—lay an articulation of blackness in agriculture which depended upon slippery discursive complementarity between plantationist truth claims and appeals to statistical authority. By examining the centrality of agriculture to the ways in which Stone and Willcox articulate their anti-Black epistemology, I emphasize that plantationism is incorporated in the very genealogy of agro-industry.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK & CONTENT

Katherine McKittrick (2013) has called for attention to the plantation as an "ongoing locus of antiblack violence and death that can no longer analytically sustain this violence" (McKittrick 2013, p 3–4).

McKittrick's work positions the plantation as a shifting set of sociospatial practices, relations, and conceptions (McKittrick 2006, McKittrick 2013). Importantly, this entails an expansive and dynamic conceptualization of the plantation which does not simply cast it into the past as a now archaic site of racial oppression and the production of agricultural commodities. Instead, the plantation as both an idea, and as a set of spatial relations "housed and historicizes racial violences that demanded innovative resistances" (McKittrick 2013, p 5).

While McKittrick traces the plantation towards the contemporary architectures of confinement, violence, and resistance of the modern cityscape and prison, the plantation can also be tracked as a set of shifting agricultural relations, as Clyde Woods (1998) has shown through his work on the plantation bloc and the blues epistemology in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Through a richly-textured historical account, Woods places the emergence of industrial agriculture in the Delta within a history of the racial violence of plantation agriculture. He also shows how this "plantation bloc" model of development was contested by a Black liberationist "blues epistemology" (Woods 1998). Woods situates the 20th century development of industrial agriculture as a new "enclosure movement" against African Americans in the Delta (Woods 1998, p 297). By placing Green Revolution developments in the historical context of plantation racism and resistance, Woods anticipates Patel's call to focus on the "long Green Revolution"—a *longue durée* understanding of the Green Revolution as a counter-revolutionary project of capitalist agriculture, and an economic and technological

means of the redistribution of wealth and power (Patel 2013).

This essay builds upon Woods (1998) by focusing on the epistemological antecedents of the development of industrial agriculture in the Mississippi Delta, and in particular by emphasizing the rooting of agricultural industrialization in racist plantationist truth claims and epistemologies. Woodruff (2003) has shown that notions of technological mastery were central to planter self-mythology and date to the era of land clearance and railroad and levee building in the late 19th century. She also has documented the ways in which conceptions of regional development and progressive agriculture drew upon white supremacist commitments to planter dominance. In a similar vein, Wilson (2000) has emphasized that industrial development in Birmingham was shaped by planters, who insisted on the maintenance of a "regime of accumulation" centered upon racial regulation of labor and undergirded by anti-Black racism. With few exceptions, however, scholars have paid insufficient attention to the role of racist epistemologies in the very conception of agricultural development in the plantation South. Yet as Woods argued, emergent social sciences served in the "redefinition of monopolization and mass eviction as progress and modernization" (Woods 1998, 132). As articulated by Stone and Willcox, agro-industrial development was an epistemological and material project that served to "conceal, yet violently situate" (McKittrick & Woods 2007, 2) Blacks in the Delta. Yet the traces of the challenge Black subjects posed to the plantation as a space of violent confinement and exploitation can be seen in the obsessive attention to "the Negro"

which permeates *Studies in the American Race Problem*.

Writing especially of the archives of slavery, McKittrick discusses the work of numbers in “affirming the unknowable (black objecthood) and disguising the untold (black human being)” (McKittrick 2014, 16). Numbers also, however, serve as a stage for survival stories, since “what is not there is *living*” (McKittrick 2014, 23). Stone and Willcox drew upon census statistics to attempt to tell a story of inevitable Black decline in the face of white competition, but this recourse to statistics was animated by escape from and threats to plantation domination and enumeration. Their use of census statistics represented an attempt to “track the threat of heterogeneity” (Goldberg 2001, 190), revealing a desire to assert white material and epistemological domination while simultaneously bearing an imprint of the limits of domination.

As I show through attention to Stone and Willcox, early twentieth century conceptions of agricultural “industry” were central to the reproduction of anti-Black geographies, counterrevolutionary attempts to reproduce the plantation as a site of profit and spatial control in the face of insurgent and non-oppressive agrarian possibilities. As W.E.B. Du Bois emphasized in *Black Reconstruction*, in the years after the Civil War began, Blacks in the plantation South mobilized for a different economy, political system, and vision of humanity. According to Du Bois, this revolt came in three phases: a “general strike” against enslavement which shifted the balance of power in the war to the North, the armed mobilization of Blacks which “brought peace and emancipation to America” (Du Bois 1935, p 84), and

postbellum mobilizations for full economic and political power. The promise of Reconstruction, however, was subverted by a “counter-revolution of property” (Du Bois 1935, p 580), in which northern industry and southern plantation oligarchy were both active participants in theft and suppression of political possibilities.

Du Bois chronicles the consolidation of corporate power during the first ten years of Reconstruction, arguing that its success was “dependent and consequent on the failure of democracy in the South” (Du Bois 1935, p 584). This “theft and corruption,” of which members of the plantation aristocracy in the South were central, was instead blamed on Black freedom (Du Bois 1935, p 583). Du Bois emphasizes the role of racism as a means of consolidating planocratic order in the South, as poor whites served as a “special police force” of slavery (Du Bois 1935, 12). As Inwood highlights in his reading of *Black Reconstruction*, the overthrow of Reconstruction was accomplished through a “racial fix” to economic and political crisis, which reinstalled elite power by restoring historical class and racial alliances between poor whites and economic elites (Inwood 2015, 7).

Black landownership posed a distinct challenge to the maintenance of the plantation as a white supremacist institution, as it threatened the control of both land and labor which formed the foundations of the plantation economy (Woods 1998, Wilson 2000). Industrial capitalism depended upon landless workers, and in the post-Reconstruction South, the economic and social institutions of the racial state worked to keep Blacks “landless, and willing to work for low wages” (Wilson 2000, 65). Reconstruction, however, had shaken—though not shattered—these

institutions, and in the Delta, Black landowners were the majority at the turn of the 20th century (Willis 2000). The Delta, in fact, represented a region where plantations were less deeply rooted historically, as most Delta plantations were established in the post-bellum period (Cobb 1992, Wilson 2000). With this context in mind, I understand Stone and Willcox's writing as a manifestation of the anti-Black anxieties of plantation racism, rather than a reflection of "white supremacy" as a successful totalization of white domination. It was precisely the insecurity of the plantation as a site for total white control which required a manifesto such as *Studies in the American Race Problem*.

STUDIES IN THE AMERICAN RACE PROBLEM

Alfred Holt Stone was an early 20th-century Delta planter, and owned an approximately 2,500 acre plantation in Washington County, not far from the Mississippi River (Hollandsworth 2008). In his 1908 book *The American Race Problem*, he styled himself as an expert who possessed an intimate familiarity with "the race problem" as a southern white man. Stone's writings would be noteworthy even if they were simply the personal musings of a plantation owner—Stone's professed fascination with "the Negro" provides an insight into plantationist racial ideology in the early decades of the twentieth century. But they gain additional significance since Stone did not merely reflect, but actively played a part in shaping white supremacist epistemology. Stone was a prominent and influential member of the Delta elite but also styled himself as an intellectual emissary

of southern plantation whiteness to other regions of the country. Stone openly lamented what he perceived as the failure of whites from elsewhere to understand the position of white Southerners. Of his intellectual endeavors, Stone moaned that "here we have one of the difficulties in the way of the man with whose daily life it is bound up from infancy to the grave, when he would talk of it to those for whom it exists only as a 'national question'—a subject merely of academic interest (Stone 1908, p 3)." Stone emphasized that he, as a member of the plantation elite, knew the importance of "the race problem" whereas it existed only as an academic concern for white people of other regions.

Stone's calls for national white solidarity with planters were bolstered by the willingness of Walter F. Willcox to write the laudatory introduction, and contribute three essays to Stone's plantationist manifesto. Willcox was a major figure in turn of the century social science. Beyond serving as a professor of economics and statistics at Cornell University, where he instituted one of the first U.S. courses in statistics, Willcox was in charge of the division of the Census Bureau that interpreted and analyzed the results of the 1900 census, and continued to work with the Census Bureau for almost three decades (Leonard 1961, pp 16–17). Willcox was, in fact, an early advocate of the formation of the Bureau of the Census, and thus was crucial to both the existence and the early trajectory of the Bureau (Rice 1964, p 341).

Willcox was instrumental in providing authority to Stone, promoting his work within the discipline of economic demography, recommending him for membership in the American Economic

Association, and selecting him as a member of the association's Committee to Study the Negro (Aldrich 1979). Willcox contributed three of essays to the text—"Negro Criminality," "Census Statistics of the Negro," and "The Probable Increase of the Negro Race in the United States." Along with Willcox's glowing introduction, his three essays effectively bookend Stone's writings, bolstering Stone's plantationist claims with a supposedly disinterested analysis of cold, hard, census data. Stone's essays, largely reprinted from other sources, range from ontological claims of inherent white genetic superiority to comparative studies of "the race problem" in the North and the South, along with several essays which focus specifically on "race relations" in the Mississippi Delta and US South. Stone's work was published in respected venues, from publications of the American Economic Association to the *Historical Review* and the *South Atlantic Quarterly*. In addition to *Studies in the American Race Problem*, I draw upon "The Negro and Agricultural Development," an article Stone published two years later in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Stone 1910). Taken as a whole, these texts both reflect, and are a key piece of, plantationist epistemologies of race and agricultural development in the early 20th century.

Studies in the American Race Problem enjoyed significant acclaim. The *New York Times*, for example, lauded the book, saying that Stone "...comes nearer being the American authority, in his particular province, than any man now living" of "the race problem" (*New York Times* 1909, p 20). In particular, the *Times* praised the attempt by Stone and Willcox to translate planter's

views on race for Northern audiences. Representative of scholarly reactions to Stone and Willcox, the *South Atlantic Quarterly* reported that "these students of the question offer no plan of action, but seek to portray actual conditions in an unbiased and dispassionate way," and called "the substantial harmony of the conclusions reached [between Stone and Willcox] especially noteworthy" (Glasson 1908, p 195).

Stone and Willcox were far from alone in using statistics to leverage racist claims, but must be situated within a deep history of statistical racism. Early uses of statistics on human variability were geared towards measuring and demonstrating differences in racial capacity—shaped by a fundamental presumption of white superiority (Gould 1997). As McClintock puts it, 19th century science was preoccupied with the "vocation of measuring worth off the human body" (McClintock 1995, p 50). As statistics emerged in the context of colonial expansion and slavery, they measured inequality and offered it as a proof of European superiority (Zuberi 2001, p 19). Malthusian population science, a predecessor of 20th century demography, mapped a patriarchal, imperial landscape, in which mortality rates provide a "marker of moral restraint"—a reference for the morality of racialized populations (McCann 2009, p 151). Malthus's 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* was a counter-revolutionary manifesto and a repressive justification of the "existing order of things," which were attributed to a "natural law" of population (Harvey 1974, pp 258–259).

With the rise of evolutionary theory in the second half of the 19th century, and its "unholy alliance with the allure of

numbers” (McClintock 1995, p 49), scientific racism was enshrined. McClintock describes it as “the most authoritative attempt to place social ranking and social disability on a biological and ‘scientific’ footing” (McClintock 1995, p 49). Francis Galton, a pioneer statistician and cousin of Charles Darwin, was the founder of the eugenics movement. (McClintock 1995, p 50; Gillham 2009). Statistical approaches treated race—rather than racism—as a causal force, and a research factor which was assumed to unproblematically reflect innate biological difference (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva 2008, p 7).

Many social statisticians reproduce these assumptions in the present day (Zuberi 2001, Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva 2008), but in the late 19th century US, some of the most prominent proponents of social statistics were unapologetically white supremacist. Francis Amasa Walker, US Census superintendent from 1870–1890 and president of the American Statistical Association, was one of the primary proponents of the “black disappearance hypothesis,” which held that Africans were a distinct population in the United States, and had a limited ability to survive in the US post-emancipation (Zuberi 2001, p 25; Walker 1890). Late 19th century social science was so invested in the ideology of natural racial competitive advantage that the apparent increase of the Black population evidenced by the 1880 census spawned numerous intellectual attempts to reconcile these confounding results with foundational assumptions of white supremacy (Frederickson 1987). Though not as wedded to statistics, the environmental determinism dominant in turn of the century US geography rested

upon assumptions of Euro-American superiority, which were always at least implicit in attempts to elaborate a unitary theory of human and environmental variation. Geographer Ellen Churchill Semple, for example, emphasized the effects of “a beneficent struggle for existence” among whites in creating US “civilization,” and held that the South had been plagued with territorial expansion without a concomitant increase in the white population (Semple 1903, p 281).¹

As Kalil Gibram Muhammad documents, the 1890s saw the invention of a “statistical discourse on black criminality” which “became one of the most widely accepted bases for justifying prejudicial thinking, discriminatory treatment, and/or acceptance of racial violence as an instrument of public safety” (Muhammad 2011, pp 3–4). Statistical discourses on race and crime, Muhammad argues, were accepted by Northerners and Southerners alike, and social scientific treatments of “the Negro Problem” allowed “the vicious backlash against Black Southerners who were attempting to assert their freedom” to be rebranded as a “tale of national progress, of the triumph of a stronger race over a weaker race” (Muhammad 2011, p 30). Thus crime rates were offered, divorced from the context of the criminalization of Black life, as proof of inherent “Negro criminality,” and high Black mortality rates were treated as proof of moral depravity and competitive disadvantage (Muhammad 2011). Stone and Willcox wrote within this well-worn tradition of using statistics to bolster anti-Blackness, and I am particularly concerned with the expression of an anti-Black *agricultural*

epistemology in *Studies in the American Race Problem*, a point to which I now turn.

“EQUALITY’S ONE AND ONLY
TEST”: “COMPETITION” AND
“INDUSTRY” AS AGRARIAN
VIOLENCE

In this section, I will focus on several ideologies which 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 20th century (Woods 1998). As I will show, the emphasis that Stone and Willcox place on “industry” and productivity in agriculture served to naturalize racial inequality, concealing the way in which white violence and uneven ownership served to actively reproduce that inequality. Their emphasis on “racial competition” as the definitive characteristic of postbellum agriculture, alongside the redefinition of any assertions of Black agency as “shiftlessness and improvidence” (Stone 1908, p 196), further naturalized the ontological claim of “white supremacy.” A focus on Stone and Willcox provides insight into the positioning of agro-industrialization as a means of the reproduction of the plantation as a set of racially oppressive relations in the face of Black resistance to domination.

In *Studies in the American Race Problem*, Stone argued that abolition and Reconstruction upset the “peaceful common occupancy” of the South by Blacks and whites, replacing the “natural relations” of white domination with the “artificial

guarantees of legislation” (Stone 1908, pp 251–252). This, he argued, was the genesis of “the race problem” (Stone 1908, p 251). Stone paid homage to the antebellum plantation, in which “a high order of intelligence was required to handle successfully a plantation on a large scale,” and offered a typology of contemporary agricultural positions—plantation agriculture, tenant farmers, and independent landowners (Stone 1910, p 13). For Stone, the question was “one of speculating upon the length of time the plantation system, based upon Negro labor, can be maintained” (Stone 1910, p 13). He argued that “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” (Stone 1910, p 13).

Despite his obsessive fascination with Black agricultural labor, Stone was unwilling to admit the value of Black work 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” (Stone 1910, p 14). However, he acknowledged the role that Black landownership might play in undermining his racist pronouncements:

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. (Stone 1910, pp 14–15)

Stone promoted agriculture as the sphere in which racial worth and difference could be adjudicated. Concealed in Stone's prose, but permeating his arguments, was the very real threat that Stone saw in the form of Black success in agriculture. It was a threat not only to the dogma of white supremacy, but to the very plantation system upon which planter power and financial success depended.

As Willis (2000) has documented, the Delta in the late 19th century was in many ways a region in which Blacks could pursue the possibility of economic success and landownership. When Stone and Willcox wrote *Studies in the American Race Problem*, the system of sharecropping and debt peonage had not yet been fully solidified in the Delta. Planters initially needed to offer favorable tenancy arrangements to attract Black workers in the postbellum period, and there were significant possibilities for tenants to purchase land (Willis 2000, pp 3–4). Before 1910, the majority of farms in the Delta were in fact operated by owners or renters, and Blacks constituted the majority of farmowners in the Delta in 1900 (Willis 2000, p 50 & 188). Increasingly usurious loans contributed to a declining rate of purchases of land by Blacks in the Delta by the 1890s, but some groups of Black farmers in the Delta were able to avoid such exploitative arrangements through cooperative ventures (Willis 2000, pp 127–129; Woodruff 2003). Planters and merchants were hostile to Black political and economic coordination, however. In 1889, when Black farmers organized and marched together as the Colored Farmers' Alliance, the Mississippi National Guard and local white militias violently suppressed this expression of cooperative resistance (Willis 2000, pp 133–136).

Stone's writing, in fact, betrays that he perceived Black autonomy as a threat. In *Studies in the American Race Problem*, Stone related his own "plantation experiment," which represented, he claimed, his contribution to understandings of "the business relations between the plantation management and its Negro labour" (Stone 1908, p 125). Stone was interested in finding the best way to maintain an "assured tenantry"—to check the mobility of tenants. As Stone described it, his experiment consisted of allowing tenants to purchase their own tools and rent the land rather than sharecropping. Stone claimed that the results were disastrous because tenants were in the habit of leaving Dunleith Plantation once they had improved their financial situation. Of course, Stone rebranded this mobility as racial deficiency—"we were quite satisfied," Stone wrote, "of our entire incapacity to make the average plantation Negro realise the remotest causal relation between stability and prosperity" (Stone 1908, pp 130–131).

Stone saw Black mobility as a challenge to plantation control, and expressed his anxieties by rebranding Black agency as "apparently instinctive" capriciousness (Stone 1908, p 131). If mobility has been central to Black strategies of survival and anti-racist struggles (Alderman & Inwood 2015), the epistemic rebranding of mobility as inferiority was central to the plantationist desire to "violently situate" (McKittrick and Woods 2007, p 2) Blacks in the Delta. Therefore, Stone offered his "plantation experiment" as a testament to the need for Delta planters to secure coercive labor arrangements, while rebranding this call for repression as the correct response to the "apparently instinctive"

desire—against their best interests—of Blacks to move (Stone 1908, p 131). During this same period, vagrancy laws were instituted to criminalize Black mobility, codifying planter power over workers through race (Cobb 1992, Woods 1998, Willis 2000, Woodruff 2003). Yet through their theory of “racial competition,” Stone and Willcox offered the effects of racial violence as the justification for white supremacy.

“Racial Competition”

Stone and Willcox 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” (Stone 1908, p 169). Stone focused 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 bemoaned, “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” (Stone 1908, p 174). Stone performatively drew 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. (Stone 1908, p 176) [emphasis added]

Stone compared Black-operated farms and Italian-operated farms, concluding that Italian farmers were more efficient, intelligent, and productive. Stone’s preoccupation with impugning Black agricultural practice extended 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” (Stone 1908, p 195). He eagerly followed the attempts of Leroy Percy, another influential Delta Planter, to recruit Italian workers in place of Black labor. As historian John Barry has documented, the use of Italian labor was hardly a resounding success, and Percy’s heavy-handed tactics were resisted by Italian workers (Barry 1998, pp 111–113). Nevertheless, in *The American Race Problem*, Stone lauded Italians in the Delta as evidence of Black inferiority, enlarging the boundaries of white agrarian identity in order to emphasize the supposed inferiority of Black agricultural practice. At the same time, he implicitly articulated the importance of competition in sustaining his paranoid racial epistemology:

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. (Stone 1908, p 200)

As Stone's writing indicates, "plantation epistemologies" (Woods 1998) of agricultural development in the Delta were animated by this racial philosophy of competition as both effect and instrument of white superiority, while glossing over the role of coercion and racial violence. According to Stone, the anti-vagrancy law enacted in 1904 to "drive negro loafers into the field" (Cobb 1993), the false pretense law which instituted criminal punishment for tenants who abandoned even a minor contract (McMillan 1990, Cobb 1993), and the extralegal violence of lynching (Woods 1998, Woodruff 2003) are presumably matters of no consequence to the question of competition. Competition, in fact, provided a crucial point of articulation of Stone's plantationist racism and Willcox's statistical analysis, which turned upon a notion of white agricultural industry.

Agricultural "Industry"

If Stone held that whites were dramatically superior agriculturalists, Willcox's statistical analysis was framed in part as an investigation of the capacity of Blacks to "develop" and adapt to technological changes in agriculture. His statistical analysis held forth the ostensible possibility of Black adaptation to white technological ideals. Willcox's starting point, however, was also an assumption of white technological supremacy—or "industry."

He 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 develop" (Willcox in Stone 1908, p 453). 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" (Willcox in Stone 1908, p 456).

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" (Willcox in Stone 1908, p 456). Thus, due to the productivity of 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" (Willcox in Stone 1908, p 458). Willcox could hardly have been unaware of evidence contradicting his assertions—even evidence presented on his own terms. In a 1904 Census Bulletin to which Willcox was a chief contributor, "Negroes in the United States," W.E.B. Du Bois presented statistical evidence that the number of Black farmers in the South were increasing, but emphasized that Black economic prosperity was hindered in much of the "Black Belt" region by the crop-lien system, lack of educational opportunities, and limited access to affordable land (Du Bois 1904,

pp 97–98). Where Willcox presented inequality as evidence of white supremacy, Du Bois subtly but effectively emphasized the role of racism in limiting Black agricultural opportunities.

When Stone and Willcox released *Studies in the American Race Problem*, moreover, the agricultural land grant system—the system responsible for delivering technology and support to farmers—had been institutionalized on a thoroughly separate and unequal basis (Johnson 2011, Harris & Hyden 2017). Indeed, from this uneven foundation, the percentage of total federal and state funds apportioned to Black land grant institutions declined steadily between 1900 and 1932 (Johnson 2011, p 151). The Delta Branch Experiment Station at Stoneville was established as part of this segregated and unequal system of research and support, delivering research and technological help to planters (Giesen 2011, pp 58–59). Nevertheless, Stone and Willcox presented any use of technology as evidence of white superiority, with Willcox arbitrating the effects of “racial competition” through demographic analysis. In the essay “The Probable Increase of the Negro Race in the United States,” Willcox returned to the question of new agricultural technology in the South, reading it through the lens of the “black disappearance hypothesis” (Zuberi 2001). Willcox interpreted occupational and population changes as evidence that “the Negro race in the South, in its competition with the whites”, was losing ground (Willcox in Stone 1908, p 523).¹ The increase in cotton manufacturing in the South represented an “invasion of the Negroes’ home,” but offered little opportunity for employment (Willcox in Stone 1908, p 523). He pointed

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 (Willcox in Stone 1908, pp 525–526). Finally, Willcox pointed 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 seems probable that, when the boll weevil reaches the cotton growing district of the lower Mississippi. . . 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. (Willcox in Stone 1908, p 526–527)

As historian James Giesen has shown, the arrival of the boll weevil precipitated struggles throughout the South over the structure and future of cotton production, and of the means of responding to the threat of the boll weevil itself (Giesen 2011). The plantation elite in the Delta saw the boll weevil as a threat to the power of planters, and particularly their control over Black workers, who they feared would leave upon the arrival of the weevil (Cobb 1992, Giesen 2011). “Under threat by the advancing insect pest”, Giesen writes, “these elite planters thought first of the farm workforce” (Giesen 2011, p 56). Giesen documents that Delta planters, led by Stone, attempted to manipulate and control information about the boll weevil’s destructiveness in order to maintain labor

control in Delta agriculture, advocating the planting of *more* cotton in face of the evidence in support of agricultural diversification (Giesen 2011, pp 61–65). The putative observations Stone made about race and agriculture were conscious *interventions* intended to strengthen planter power.

Willcox's demographic analysis, it bears emphasizing here, was impossible to disentangle from his and Stone's white supremacist polemics, which played upon widely-held racist assumptions in white American society (Muhammad 2011). The "black disappearance hypothesis" espoused by Willcox linked a plantationist ideology that slavery had been a benevolent institution with a social Darwinist assumption that population changes, measured in racial terms, could prove white competitive superiority and Black inferiority (Zuberi 2001). Framed in this way, racial violence and economic coercion could be taken as proof of white superiority within any areal unit if they led to a measured relative decline in the "Negro population."² The Great Migration of southern Blacks to northern cities in subsequent decades could, in this framing, be taken as proof positive of inherent white supremacy in the South, rather than as a testament to Black tenacity and ingenuity in the face of white violence and rapid technological change.

Stone and Willcox, of course, ignored uneven access to capital and institutional support for capital-based agricultural intensification (See Daniel 1985, Johnson 2011, Reid and Bennet 2012). Instead, they used competition as evidence of innate Black inferiority, interpreting technological changes as functions of racial "industry," rather than moments of racial

formation within supremely unequal material context of plantation agriculture after the violent overthrow of Reconstruction (Du Bois 1935, Cobb 1993, Willis 2000). Stone and Willcox employed a double meaning of industry in agriculture. On one hand, industry signified the willingness and commitment to work. Formed in opposition with supposed Black "shiftlessness and improvidence," this definition revolved around the normalization of whiteness as *agricultural* aptitude. On the other hand, industry was defined by intelligence and the mastery of *technological* developments in agriculture.

Through this notion of "industry" and the ontology of racial competition, Stone's plantationism and Willcox's demographic analysis were articulated—in Hall's (1996) dual sense of linking and expressing—as an anti-Black agrarian epistemology beyond the confines of the plantation South. Willcox argued that the collaboration between a planter and statistician would bring together disciplines and regions: "The statistician, knowing little or the problem beyond what he may read in his figures, finds in Mr. Stone's papers a needed complement, and also in the main I believe a confirmation of his results. *Thus, North and South, theory and practice, figures and concrete specific experience are approaching a unity of conviction*" (Willcox in Stone 1908, pp xv-xvi) [emphasis added]. By presenting *competition* as a neutral arbiter of racial agrarian worth, and representing the effects of racial violence and an agricultural state and economy geared toward planter success as inherent white agricultural *industry*, the coupling of Stone's plantation empirics and Willcox's statistics provided a framework for situating the plantation

within national concepts of agricultural development.

CONCLUSION

Stone and Willcox's emphasis on "racial competition" is particularly insidious when put in the context of pervasive and enduring discrimination against Black farmers and landowners (Green et al. 2011, Daniel 2012, Grim 2012, Reid and Bennet 2012). By rebranding exclusion, exploitation and discrimination as white agricultural "industry," work like that of Stone and Willcox provided both a rationale and a blueprint for the continuation of the plantation in and through the institutions of the agricultural state.² White agrarian modernizers looked backwards to the specter of Black landownership or Black labor and used it to justify continued agrarian racism. A decade after *Studies in the American Race Problem* was released, for example, a survey of Mississippi state resources wrote that "The day of slipshod, unscientific methods of farming in Mississippi is past. Ignorant butchering of the soil by unsupervised negro labor, with resulting slight yields, is no longer permissible" (Lowe 1919, p 224).

But try as Stone, Willcox and others might to cast Black farmers and workers as inferior, bound to disappear in the face of the "factor of white competition," myriad Black farmers continued to hold onto land and carve out diverse agrarian spaces in spite of tremendous obstacles. Black agricultural communities like Mound Bayou, in the Mississippi Delta, provided important sites of relative autonomy and mobilization in the Mississippi Delta during the Jim Crow era, and still exist today (Woods 1998, Willis 2000). Scholars have

stressed the significant decline of Black farmers in the 20th century (Hinson & Robinson 2008, Green et al. 2011, Reid & Bennett 2012, Daniel 2013), but the fact that many were able to persist in spite of such adversity is a testament to the power of Black organization and ingenuity in the rural South.

Black farming and landownership was, in fact, both a platform for and object of southern Black freedom struggles in the South. In many parts of the rural South, Black-owned farms served as a space to challenge economic and political oppression, and Black farmers provided critical support to freedom struggle organizing—even as mechanization was wielded as a political weapon against Black agricultural workers (Payne 1995, Woods 1998, Woodruff 2003, Gilbert & Wood 2004). The southern Black freedom struggles mobilized alternative visions of agricultural development, within what Woods (1998, 2007) has characterized as the "blues tradition" of organizing. Fannie Lou Hamer, for example, founded the Freedom Farms Cooperative in Ruleville, Mississippi less than a decade after being removed from a plantation for registering to vote (Lee 1999, Woods 1997). Black farmers throughout the South challenged USDA discrimination and exclusion, forming cooperatives and contesting local USDA elections (see for example De Jong 2002, Ashmore 2008, Jeffries 2009).

The emphasis that Stone and Willcox placed on white ingenuity and "industry" in agricultural practice depended upon denying 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 (Carney 2001). And as Giesen has argued, the innovations of Black farmers and workers in controlling the boll weevil has been systematically ignored or misattributed to the innovations of white farmers and agricultural researchers (Giesen 2011, pp 27–29). From the very establishment of plantation agriculture, Stone and Willcox's supposed white ingenuity in "improved agriculture" was rebranded theft and coercion. Ignoring power relations, however, Stone and Willcox treated inequalities in the ownership of agriculture and land as proof of white superiority.

Many scholars have documented the consolidation of twentieth-century agriculture and the favoring of large-scale interests in US agricultural policy (see for example Lobao & Meyer 2001, Freidmann 2005, McMichael 2009, Carolan 2012), a scale bias which intensified the dispossession through pervasive discrimination against non-white farmers (Daniel 2012, Reid and Bennett 2012). The US federal court ruling in *Pigford v. Glickman*, which established that African American farmers were entitled to compensation for USDA discrimination, highlighted a piece of a long history of the USDA's role in shaping differential outcomes in agriculture through racist practices (Daniel 2012, Grim 2012). Yet as I have emphasized through a focus on Stone and Willcox, the injustices of the 20th century USDA are historically-rooted, and exceed the state. Agricultural industrialization, particularly, was shaped by anti-Black epistemological project which combined statistical practices of calculating population-level "racial competition" and plantationist truth claims of white agrarian superiority.

Both the scale bias of 20th century agricultural policy and the myriad moments of USDA discrimination are part of a deeper history of white anxiety and plantationist investment in notions of "industry" as agrarian superiority. *Studies in the American Race Problem* represents just one moment in which the effects of anti-Black violence were articulated through national statistical practices as evidence of white agrarian worth. Yet power of the innovative practices of growing and surviving practiced by Black farmers and agricultural workers in the South gave lie to Stone and Willcox's theories—the myriad attempts to "conceal, yet violently situate" Blacks within the plantation South (McKittrick & Woods 2007, p 2).

NOTES

1. See Kobyashi (2014) for a more detailed treatment of racial epistemologies in the historical disciplinary development of geography.

2. For the interested reader I will briefly note that—among many other faults and miscalculations—Willcox significantly underestimated the total population and percentage of the population of the United States by the year 2000 comprised of people who identified as Black or African American (Willcox in Stone 1908, 503), Census Bureau 2011, 8). A more detailed critique of Willcox's statistics on their own terms is beyond the scope of this paper. The profound influence of racist assumptions in the framing, collection and interpretation of racial demographic data was, however, rather efficiently exhibited by Francis Walker, Willcox's predecessor in the Census Bureau. Walker, a fellow proponent of the "black disappearance" hypothesis, argued that the 1870 Census was flawed because the Reconstruction government was working to "alienate all friends of law and order, of public decency and public honesty"

(Walker 1890, 95). Walker also seemed to believe that Black census workers were incapable of gathering reliable data and were unfit for the paramount task of winning the favor of planters (Walker 1890, 97).

3. In fact, many Black farmers have referred to the USDA as “The Last Plantation,” a label which gained wider attention through lawsuits and protests against USDA discrimination (Fletcher 1996, Sherrod & Whitney 2012).

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