

**From Egypt to Canaan:  
Why African American Exodusters  
Left Mississippi for Kansas in 1879**

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When I landed on the soil, I looked on the ground and I says this is free ground. Then I looked on the heavens, and I says them is free and beautiful heavens. Then I looked within my heart, and I says to myself I wonder why I never was free before? When I knew I had all my family in a free land, I said let us hold a little prayer meeting; so we held a little meeting on the river bank. It was raining but the drops fell from heaven on a free family, and the meeting was just as good as sunshine. We was thankful to God for ourselves and we prayed for those who could not come. I asked my wife did she know the ground she stands on. She said, 'No!' I said it is free ground; and she cried like a child for joy. (Painter 3-4)

The speaker in the passage above, John Solomon Lewis, moved his family to Kansas in the Exodus movement of 1879 that swept the Gulf states. Following the Civil War and the subsequent end of Reconstruction in the 1870s, the South faced social problems it had never encountered before. Race relations, in particular the tensions between the two races, became the focus of Southern Society. Reconstruction had brought some political protection for the former slaves, but with the fall of Reconstruction and the success of Democratic Redemption, that political protection disappeared (Van Deusen 112). Many who had been in power before the Civil War returned to the state

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government following “Redemption.” In Mississippi, after the election of 1876, a “general feeling of insecurity”<sup>1</sup> gripped the black community of Mississippi (and the other Gulf states); therefore many African Americans began to look for an alternative. Some looked northeast, to the land of the abolitionists. But others looked northwest, to Kansas, the land of John Brown and the Republicans. This group of African Americans who looked to Kansas would leave on a large scale beginning in 1879, earning the title, Exodusters. Their exodus to freer land would cause controversy and concern throughout the United States. In 1880, the United States Senate took note of the large numbers of African Americans leaving the South, and they launched an investigation, resulting in three volumes of interviews before a Senate Committee regarding the causes, successes, failures, and future of this Exodus to Kansas and the larger American West. The Senate interviewed many who experienced the Exodus, black and white, Western and Southern, and of varying political and social positions. A large portion of this paper is based upon their testimonies. The historiography of the Exodus supports the conclusion that African Americans felt pushed from Mississippi *and* pulled to Kansas. Most agree that the Exodus was due to an increase in violence against the African American community, a loss of political rights, and economic oppression, as well as being drawn by the promise of a new life in Kansas. There are, however, varying theories of migration. The theory used here in part is the “push-pull” theory. However, this theory, as developed through the study of migration, applies solely to economics. It contends that people move from areas where they have little economic success or opportunity, to places where they expect to find more (Norstrom 223-224). (There is disagreement as to whether the push or the pull factors are more influential in the decision to move.)

This paper seeks to modify the push-pull theory in recognition of the fact that factors other than economics also spurred an African-American Exodus of large proportions. Only a few months after the start of the Exodus, it became apparent that there was little work in Kansas. And yet the Exodus continued in large numbers for at least another year. This paper will argue that former slaves felt pushed from their native state of Mississippi because of violence and political disenfranchisement as well as an inability for economic advancement;

they were drawn to Kansas because it represented to them the land of freedom as well as a place with abundant land for all.

African Americans felt pushed from Mississippi after the end of Reconstruction, largely due to the daily threat of violence. *The Summit Sentinel*, a Mississippi newspaper, reported that three houses were burned, belonging to three local merchants, in January of 1878. Several black families working for the merchants lived in the burnt houses. This Democratic newspaper, lamented that “the honest and hard-working class of negroes are daily leaving this section, seeking a clime more congenial to their future welfare” (*Report II*: 270). Their comment reflects the concern of some in the white community that Mississippi was becoming a land of hostility for African Americans. The same paper also published a notice from February of the same year. It was addressed to Calvin Ostin, a black man in the community, “This is to notify you that you can’t stay here innay [sic] longer than fifteen days; it’s nothing that we have against you, as for you have a good name with white and black. Now, if not gone within fifteen days you will receive buckshot soup” (*Report II*: 265). Of course the owner of the property Ostin lived and worked on published his own message that if he caught anyone trespassing he would not be afraid “to use a little buckshot” himself (*Report II*: 270). This Democratic newspaper reported such violence, although it belonged to the party that opposed black suffrage. These articles demonstrate that large portions of the white population were not in favor of the violence, but they also show the violence was prevalent enough to have become an issue for the entire community. J. H. Wheeler of St. Louis, Missouri, who gathered reports from nearly 200 emigrants on their way to Kansas, testified that the Exodusters had been threatened in Mississippi by “Men going around through the country whipping, shooting, and bulldozing them” in particular, the more educated ones or those who seemed to be community leaders (*Report III*: 7). Frederick Marshall of Natchez, Mississippi witnessed two murders; one of the victims “was killed simply because he could read and write. That is all that was alleged against him” (*Report III*: 8). Many, like Marshall, left because they witnessed violence, not because they had themselves been victimized. The Reverend J. K. Daniels left Warren County, Mississippi because, “a man was killed, named Washington Davenport. I saw him killed. I would not return to the south for anything” (*Report III*: 9).

Thomas Wallace, who also left Warren County for Kansas, testified that, “A man...by the name of Thomas, was shot and killed by the whites for having some words with a white man about his cotton” (*Report III*: 59). Edward Porter, again of Warren County, reported more violence associated with cotton: “Last year in cotton-ginning time on Berge’s place a man by the name of Phil Taylor got in a dispute about his cotton at the gin-house and a man by the name of Grooms shot him dead right at the gin-house door” (*Report III*: 43). J. D. Daniels of the same county claimed that “I was constantly afraid of my life; I was threatened a week ago Friday night” (*Report III*: 50). He also said that, “Mr. Bob Henderson killed a colored blacksmith there (Newton) in 1872; never known what for” (*Report III*: 50). His statement reveals the often indiscriminate nature of violence against African Americans in Mississippi during the late 1870s. Frederick Marshall of Natchez, Mississippi narrowly escaped murder. “Just before Christmas 1878,” he testified, “three or four men came to my house to kill me, and I run out of the way; just before daylight they came there and wanted matches... they said they would kill me, and had a rope round my neck, and said they were going to kill the smart men, and I told them I didn’t know anything” (*Report III*: 53). T. J. Watts of Vicksburg, Mississippi told his story of violent threats: “I was the first man who called a meeting of the colored people, over my saloon, in June 1878, and I organized a club called the ‘Auxiliary Club,’ and I was elected president, and it came out in the Herald to brighten up their needle guns; they knew not for what reason the niggers were organizing” (*Report III*: 54). He also heard tales of other’s experiences near Vicksburg, such as Laura Lewis, “who taught school about seven miles from Bovina, [who] had to fly for her life, and left her bonnet and shawl in the school room, and her dress was torn and wet with dew by coming through the cotton fields” (*Report III*: 54). Jacob Stevens of Hinds County, Mississippi was only twenty when, “on Sidney Whitehead’s place, in Orange County, Mississippi, my brother Ike and my father were shot in my presence” (*Report III*: 55). He described his father’s death in particular: “they led him out to about the middle of the yard, and told him to stop there and told him to tell them all he knowed (I reckon they meant the club [Republican]), and he told them he didn’t know anything about it...and the captain said, ‘If he don’t know anything about it, he is the damndest old son of a bitch in

this country...and took my father on up the road...and I heard the guns, and the people went up there and found him lying right side of the stump; he was dead. He was shot all through the head and side with bullets and buckshot. He was shot to pieces” (*Report III*: 55). Stevens contended that he left because, “I think I am too good a man to stay down there and be killed, and don’t intend to do it. Couldn’t carry me back South again unless they would chain me and carry me back” (*Report III*: 56). These often gruesome descriptions of violence committed against many in the African American community demonstrate why so many feared for their lives. Arguing with a white man, being “smart,” organizing others in the community or just being African American were all common reasons whites inflicted violence upon blacks according to the newspapers of the time and the testimonies in the Senate. Fear dominated the lives of many African Americans living in Mississippi at this time.

Such indiscriminate violence was attested to by white and black. R. B. Avery testified before the Senate. Avery, a white man, had recently switched from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. He testified in the Senate that he had “been told by Democrats to watch out for myself,” because he was no longer a Democrat (*Report II*: 281). White men from St. Louis, Missouri also testified to the violence in Mississippi. Charlton J. Tandy, a black citizen of St. Louis, presented a memorial signed by the leading *white* men of St. Louis in which they concluded that “the story [of the Exodusters] is about the same in each instance: great privation and want from excessive rent exacted for land, connected with murder of colored neighbors and threats of personal violence to themselves. The tone of each statement is that of suffering and terror” (*Report II*: 39). White and black members of the community in Mississippi were both the victims and observers of racially motivated violence. The targeting of members of both races illustrates how deep and widespread the violence was becoming, and why many in the African American community feared for their very lives.

Not just men were subjected to violence; women in the black community were as well. Avery reported violence against women, testifying that, “their [African-American’s] daughters were seduced, corrupted, and prostituted, and that if a colored man attempted to resent it he would be killed” (*Report II*: 284). J. H. Johnson also reported

violence against women, though somewhat discreetly, when he testified of “the impositions practiced upon colored women in the South” (*Report II*: 290). Tandy, from St. Louis, took down many affidavits from the Exodusters, in which they pressed upon him that if white men “saw a likely, intelligent, and buxom colored girl, these men would have them, and it has become innate to pursue that course in having Negro women, and they [the women] said to me that while they were desirous of being virtuous, and all that kind of thing, that yet they were overawed with fear of these men” (*Report II*: 67). Joseph P. Starks of Grenada, Mississippi wrote to Governor St. John of Kansas asking for advice on coming to Kansas, informing the governor of the conditions in Mississippi, including that, “the white men here take our wives and daughters and do to them as they please, and we are shot if we say anything about it” (*Report II*: 398). Extreme violence perpetrated against women and children occurred as well. Tandy told another story given to him of a woman who stated that, in the presence of three witnesses, “some of these men [white men] took her child right out of her arms and dashed its brains out on a tree, and she showed the blood on her apron to prove that they killed her child right in her presence” (*Report II*: 68). The violence that occurred against African Americans in Mississippi was rampant. Many attempts by African Americans to exercise their rights or their voice were squelched by a determined few of white citizens. Violence kept African Americans not only in fear of losing their lives, but of losing their property and their families. This violence, or the fear of it, often forced a loss of rights or voice in the community. The constant fear and the loss of freedoms motivated many African Americans in Mississippi to look elsewhere for a new life.

In addition to the constant threat of violence, the African Americans of Mississippi also felt pushed to leave because of political disenfranchisement. John Milton Brown, an African American sheriff who lived in Mississippi from 1871-1876, testified from his own experience and his contact with so many Exodusters that “it is impossible to get either a fair vote or a fair count” in Mississippi for the black voter (*Report II*: 363). A Report from the Convention of Colored Men at Nashville stated that African Americans in the South were “practically denied the rights and privileges of freemen” (*Report II*: 244). This report also observed that “the political and civil rights of the colored people

from the Ohio River to the Gulf of Mexico are abridged and curtailed in every conceivable manner” (*Report II*: 245). R. B. Avery testified that the election of 1875 was carried in favor of the Democrats through “frauds and intimidations everywhere”; he further reported that white men were carrying cannons around and firing them in Lowndes County the night before, and that they also fired guns into cabins, while others were dragged out and whipped and “all to intimidate [the blacks] from voting” (*Report II*: 257). Avery also brought to light a piece of Democratic legislation that sought to disenfranchise the black population: a charge of 25 cents to vote (*Report II*: 266). Avery himself remained opposed to Negro suffrage, but his testimony nonetheless indicates the injustices in the political system in Mississippi. J. D. Daniel of Warren County, Mississippi voted in 1874, but when “the colored people held a meeting to instruct each other how to vote, two days before the voting, and we all voted the Republican ticket, as we had been generally doing, and the other party robbed the ballot box, going to Vicksburg, and threw it in the river. It was found in the river between Newton and Davis’ Bend, and then we were not allowed from that time to now to use our own judgment in voting” (*Report III*: 50). John Milton Brown stated that the black people of Mississippi “feel uneasy about their condition in every way, and especially their vote” (*Report II*: 363). In Vicksburg, according to T. J. Watts, “There was no Republican ticket nominated for the city election last June [1878], because the Democrats would allow no ticket to be nominated; they would not even allow a caucus to be held, and the colored people were afraid to attempt it” (*Report III*: 54).

In 1879, the year of the Exodus, the Senate launched an investigation into election fraud in 1876 in several Southern states, including Mississippi. Reuben Davis, the white Greenbacker candidate for the House of Representatives from Monroe County in the First Congressional District in Mississippi, attested to some of the violence and intimidation directed against both whites and blacks who opposed the Democratic Party. He encountered a group of African Americans in Columbus who, when asked whether they were going to vote or not, “said they would if they were allowed to do so, and that they had not voted since the election of 1875, and that they were afraid to go to the ballot-boxes” (Senate 1879: 704). He himself was threatened even though he was a white candidate. He reported that on the night of the election,

certain people in Columbus hung and burned him in effigy (Senate 1879: 703). The apparent cause for the threat of violence against white political candidates was merely that these whites were not Democrats. But this protest of their political affiliation reflected a fear that the African American population would elect them, and would thus regain political power. In Mayhew, Davis encountered another man who threatened him with “personal violence” because he thought “the idea here is that you are trying to reorganize the Negro” (Senate 1879: 702). Many in the white community feared that although the candidates were white, if elected by the black population, they would most likely have carried out their duties in line with this endorsement of the African American community as well as with the ideals of the Republican party; ideals that supported rights and political participation among African Americans.

Many members of the white population wanted to prevent the black community from having a political voice because they feared what Reconstruction had brought: the political empowerment of the African American community. Davis’s traveling companion, Captain Vassar, when asked whether it would be considered incendiary to encourage a black man to stand up for his rights, responded, “You better not talk too loud about that” (Senate 1879: 721). Violence against African Americans in Mississippi was often linked directly to political disenfranchisement. When asked if he believed if “the people of Mississippi think they are justified in resorting to such measures as may be necessary, whatever they may be, to prevent [colored rule],” Vassar replied, “I think they would resort to almost any means to prevent such a state of things as you are inquiring about. Our people have a great horror of being ruled by colored people” (Senate 1879: 722). Frederick Marshall of Natchez Mississippi claimed that “When you get to the polls to vote the white men won’t let the colored men vote, and say if we got to the box to put the ballot in they will shoot us” (*Report III*: 53). J. H. Field, a Democrat from Columbus who was Chairman of the district committee in the First Congressional District testified that the white people of Mississippi while they “would not wrest from him any political privileges, at the same time they would dissuade him from any active political participation” (Senate 1879: 737). He also testified that the white man would not have objected to the black man voting if the

white man had the power to direct how he, the black man, voted (Senate 1879: 742). E. A. J. McHenry, a white man from Macon, Mississippi also spoke of the Democrats' reluctance to let the black man vote for himself, "they [Democrats] have charge of the polls and the machinery of the ballot boxes and they influence the negroes' ballots in such a way that they do not express their wishes" (*Report III*: 50). Edward Leonard of Warren County was a black man who validated these statements when he claimed that "they would not let me vote there unless I voted as they wanted me to; they would kill me if I voted the Republican ticket. They said to me, 'By God, if you don't walk close and do what you are told to do, you will come up missing'" (*Report III*: 61). White fear of African American empowerment led to a climate in Mississippi that supported the disenfranchisement of the black community. A fear of violence had stilled many of their voices, and loss of any political voice silenced the African American population even further. They had most of their rights taken from them (either by force or fear of force), and they had no access to a forum in which to regain those rights. Many saw the road to advancement almost completely blocked. Thus, the black population was driven to leave Mississippi because of a loss of political rights that they sought to regain in Kansas.

It is true, also, that an inability to advance economically also pushed African Americans out of Mississippi. The Exodusters who came through St. Louis informed J. H. Johnston that although "they raised good crops they were at the end of the year in debt; that they were charged exorbitant prices for provisions, and all these things kept them down and in debt. The high prices charged them for lands and the denial of their rights as citizens induced them to leave there" (*Report II*: 290). The report from the Convention of Colored Men at Nashville, which included representatives from Mississippi, determined that "we can not expect to rise to the dignity of true manhood under the system of labor and pay as practically carried out in some portions of the South today. Wages are low at best, but when paid in scrip hav[e] no purchasing power beyond the prescribed limits of the land owner" (*Report II*: 243). The report emphasized that "the first want of the colored laborer...is to become a landholder to his own home...the colored farmer who year after year contents himself with hiring his labor, without an effort to obtain land, not only impedes his own material progress,

but is a heavy weight upon the uplifting of his race” (*Report II*: 245). Land ownership was one of the most important factors in the African American’s desire to leave the South. Because there was no opportunity for land ownership in the South, the appeal of a place claiming to have abundant land for all is clear. John Massey of Hines County, Mississippi described how, “for the last three years I leased 25 acres of land; for the last year I paid two bales of cotton for it. I didn’t make anything but make out a living” (*Report III*: 56). Without being able to save money, few could purchase land. B. F. Watson from Kansas City, Missouri elaborated even further, “They said the planters had so arranged it that they had taken all the land and would not sell to colored people, so that they can keep them as laborers” (*Report II*: 346). The most famous African American intellectual of the day, Frederick Douglass, wrote an essay on the Exodus from the Gulf states. Douglass argued the cause of the Exodus was that, “the land owners, planters and the old master-class, generally deal unfairly with them, having had their labor for nothing when they were slaves. These men, now they are free, endeavor by various devices to get it for next to nothing; work as hard, faithfully and constantly as they may, live as plainly and as sparingly as they may, they are no better off at the end of the year” (Douglass 329-30). Douglass, who drew his conclusions from conversations, testimonies, and stories of various Exodusters, conveys the economic injustice experienced by African Americans:

They say that they are the dupes and victims of cunning and fraud in signing contracts which they cannot read and cannot fully understand; that they are compelled to trade at stores owned in whole or in part by their employers, and that they are paid with orders and not with money. They say that they have to pay double the value of nearly everything they buy; that they are compelled to pay a rental of ten dollars a year for an acre of ground that will not bring thirty dollars under the hammer; that land owners are in league to prevent land-owning by Negroes; that when they work the land on shares they barely make a living. (330)

Thomas Carroll of Washington County further attested to systemic unfairness. In 1878, he reported, "I raised 48 bales of cotton and only got \$30 for it because the whites cheated me out of it. They would not allow us to express our rights even when we knew them" (*Report III*: 57). According to Carroll, even when African Americans knew they were being cheated, especially when growing cotton, raising the issue with the planter often resulted in personal violence or being kicked off the land. Their economic rights denied, the black planters could not turn to the political system, as those rights were also denied. Personal retribution was also discouraged because of a fear of violent retaliation. African American planters had no way to regain the economic rights denied them in Mississippi following the end of Reconstruction.

Many white land owners ensured that African Americans could not raise the capital that would allow them to buy land, systematically preventing them from owning their own land. Others were employed in this endeavor, the merchant in particular. Many black farmers fell into debt because they were forced to use credit in stores. They had to use credit when cotton was not growing as most tenant farmers had no money in between harvests (Deusen 114). The Southern economy of 1879 relied on credit financing, resulting in debt for most African Americans. Typically the landowner and the merchant both held a mortgage for each tenant farmer. The rents paid by tenant farmers were not only unfair, but did not fluctuate with the market, specifically the cotton market (Painter 58-9). The price of cotton fell every year after 1865. Thus the crop had to be increased every year just to break even. If a bad crop did occur, some tenant farmers could be forced to do other work for no compensation just to keep the land they lived on (Willis 36). Between 1874 and 1877, the price of cotton was just over 11 cents per pound (Willis 119). Of particular interest to the Exodus, the cotton crop of 1878-79 did not fail completely, but did not do as well as expected. Many African American farmers suffered the consequences, extra work without compensation or eviction (Deusen 116).

Outright illegal and unfair treatment of tenant farmers occurred throughout Mississippi as attested to by many of the Exodusters. With no way to right these wrongs, many saw leaving as the only option available to them. Tandy brought forward labor contracts in order to

“show that the negroes are charged ten dollars a year rent for land which would hardly sell at that price if put on that market. In the accounts current the prices of provisions are outrageously extortionate, and there is hardly a single article for which the Negroes are not required to pay at least twice its actual value. The price of meal is put down at \$2 a bushel, although it has rarely been worth more than \$1 even in the summer. Molasses is charged at \$1.50 a gallon, for which 75 cents would be a large price, and tobacco at 50 cents a plug (one-third of a pound), which is worth about 60 cents a pound” (*Report III*: 63). J. D. Daniel explained certain ways landowners extorted money from the Negro: “the landowners have their own stores and gin houses on their own plantations, in order to catch all the cotton on each place, and the tillers of the soil can’t get their cotton ginned at any other place or buy their supplies at any other place; paying 80 pounds of lint to 90 pounds per acre; selling the barrels of pork from \$15 to \$30 per barrel; have known them to sell it as high as \$40 per barrel, and have bought it at that price; corn meal \$6.50 per barrel on time; flour \$13 and \$14 per barrel, and everything else in that proportion” (*Report III*: 50). Dr. C. Rockhold, a doctor in Parsons, Kansas, told the story of one black man named Wills who figured out he was being cheated by the planter whose land he worked. Wills typically trusted the planter to weigh the cotton he grew, but on one occasion “the thought struck him to have his cotton weighed on the mill scales; and he found one hundred pounds difference between the two. Q: How large was his load? A: Five hundred pounds; it weighed five hundred pounds by the mill scales, but only four hundred pounds by the cotton house scales. He repeated the experiment twice more and found the same proportionate loss in the other bales that he weighed afterward. He then made a fuss about it, when his boss told him he could not work his land any longer; he said he was a ‘mean nigger,’ a ‘disturber of the peace’” (*Report III*: 310).

The economic conditions in Mississippi for the African American community, which almost wholly relied on agriculture, were such that economics alone motivated many to leave. Combined with the violence and political disenfranchisement that aggravated their condition, many African Americans began to look elsewhere to build a life. In light of the oppressive economic circumstances faced by African American

farmers in the South, Kansas and its supposedly abundant and cheap land became an appealing alternative.

While there were many factors that pushed the African Americans out of Mississippi, there were also many factors that pulled them to Kansas. One of those factors was that Kansas was known to the African American population of the South as the land that fought for African American freedoms. J. H. Johnston testified that the Exodusters were in Kansas because “they were in a land of freedom and were going to stay there” (*Report II*: 292). B. F. Watson believed that the emigrants “know more about Kansas than any other state. They know that it is the land of freedom” (*Report II*: 343). Charlton J. Tandy of St. Louis alluded to this concept of Kansas being “freer” than any other state when he said that “it would have touched anyone to see these little children...with the idea that now at least they were breathing God’s free air, and they did not feel any oppression on them whatever” (*Report III*: 68). The *Colored Citizen*, a prominent black newspaper, welcomed Exodusters to Kansas, “a state dedicated to freedom by all its history and upon whose soil the first successful resistance to the domination of slavery was made” (29 Apr. 1879). It again declared that “there is something infinitely honorable to the state of Kansas that its name has become the synonym of freedom all over this land” (“The Colored Emigrants,” 26 Apr. 1879). Rhetoric about Kansas often represented the state as the first battle ground against slavery and the land of freedom, images clearly appealing to the oppressed African American in Mississippi. Thomas Bell witnessed an older Exoduster who “after arriving at Wyandotte had died, and his last words were, ‘Bless God! I die in free Kansas!’” (qtd. in *Leavenworth Times* 20 Apr. 1879). Under the oppression attested to earlier, any place was freer than Mississippi for those African Americans who experienced that oppression. But Kansas in particular seemed freer because of its history and commitment to freedom for all people from its very beginnings. The black community was drawn to Kansas because of its history in the fight for African American freedoms in America.

Playing upon the religious connotations of the biblical Exodus, in which the Israelites escape slavery in Egypt to a Promised Land of freedom in Canaan, the land of milk and honey, Avery testified that someone came to Mississippi and said “Kansas was a land of milk and

honey” (*Report II*: 265). Many African Americans wrote to the governor of Kansas seeking information about this land of “milk and honey.” *The Vicksburg Herald* also highlighted the religious undertones of the movement. The description of Canaan as being merely a “Florida swamp” in comparison with Kansas truly illustrated the idea that surrounded the Exodus of leaving slavery and oppression just like the Hebrews for the Promised Land of Kansas, even better than Canaan. This religious fervor came from several sources, one being the pulpit. A writer in the *Leavenworth Times* observed, “Well, about 18 months ago a few families from my section...went to Kansas and wrote back to their friends of the glorious country, and how easy it was to make a living out there. This news got around among the people; the preachers commenced preaching it from the pulpit” (“The Negro Exodus,” 19 Mar. 1879). The *Kansas Pioneer* remarked, “No wonder these blacks are fleeing from Egypt to Kansas which has been painted to them as Canaan flowing with milk and honey” (12 Apr. 1879).

Another factor that drew the Exodusters to Kansas was the abundant land, or at least the promise of abundant land. That promise was most often conveyed through circulars that advertised the bountiful land and profit to be had in Kansas. John Milton Brown was the general superintendent for the Kansas Freedman’s Relief Association. He spoke of the large quantity of land held by the Atchison, Topeka, and Sante Fe Railroad in Kansas. They spent more than \$250,000 on advertising their lands that were for sale, and according to him, some of the circulars made their way South. He also testified that many of the Exodusters, “knew how to write, and they wrote back to their friends yet in the South how they were situated, how they were getting along, and that was an encouragement to others to come” (*Report II*: 366). Brown believed so many were coming because of the perception that “persons having even a little money can do well there” (*Report II*: 360). He went on to elaborate that some land was being sold on Indian Reservations for \$1.25 an acre, and that railroad land was going for \$3-5 an acre. Some farmers in Kansas were also renting land to men, black and white, requiring one-third of the crop if the man furnished his home and his tools, or half of the crop if the farmer had to supply the tools and such. According to Brown, wages were also anywhere from \$10-18 a month (*Report II*: 360). In contrast with the economic conditions in

Mississippi that allowed the African American farmer no way to advance or profit, reports of wages and conditions such as these were clearly appealing.

Some of these circulars specifically targeted the African American community. James S. Brown spoke of receiving “papers down South stating the government had furnished land for us in Kansas, and was giving us free transportation from St. Louis and charging us \$4 a head from Vicksburg to St. Louis, and that some railroads in Kansas would furnish us land and allow us four payments, and the government would allow us five payments; that is four and five years to pay for it” (*Report III*: 49). H. H. Stanton of Topeka, Kansas owned an eating house and hotel for the Kansas Pacific Railroad. He saw a circular that made its way down South that depicted “a nice little cottage house, a one story house, with a porch and awning in front, situated on one of our green mounds in Kansas; in front of the house stood a mule, harnessed to a cart; an old gentleman and lady, colored, were standing on the porch, and the little children were playing about in the shadow of four or five green trees. And the man that showed me that picture said that that was what got him here – forty acres and a mule and a cart” (*Report II*: 97). *The Vicksburg Herald* described other forms of advertisements, “Gorgeously illuminated chromo-lithographs of Kansas scenes” in which “the most ravishing presentiment of rural life in Kansas is depicted....in one of these pictures the ‘Old Auntie’ sits on the veranda knitting stockings while she gazes on herds of buffalo and antelope, which are feeding on the prairies beyond the wheat fields...These agricultural cartoons...are doing much to influence the minds of the more ignorant Negroes” (1879). All of these images specifically targeted African Americans by using imagery that would be appealing to them. Even if they had not depicted black families enjoying the benefits of Kansas, the ideas of prosperity of land ownership would have remained attractive to the poor tenant farmers of Mississippi.

Still, circulars that targeted people of all races pulled many to Kansas. Philip Brookings of Yazoo City, Mississippi said he left for Kansas because “we got papers down there, now and then, and everytime we read them, it was all ‘Kansas, Kansas, Kansas.’ It looked as if a man could just play wild out there, doing nothing...everybody was going to Kansas, and every newspaper we would get hold of said, ‘Go to Kansas,’

because we could make so much out there” (*Report III*: 108). A railroad attorney from Ottawa, Kansas also received testimony that “they [African Americans] had received printed circulars and letters from Kansas, stating to them that they could get government lands free; and if they did not want government lands, they could buy a tract of land by making a payment of \$5 an acre, and have 10 years to pay it off; or they could rent land and make money – cotton land” (*Report III*: 127). Benjamin Singleton, a major organizer of the movement from Tennessee and all over the South, sent around a circular that read: “HO! FOR SUNNY KANSAS! Friends and Fellow Citizens: I have just returned from the Singleton settlement in Morris County, Kansas, where I left my people in one of the finest countries for a poor man in the world...The surrounding country is fine rolling prairie. Plenty of stone and water and wood on the streams. Plenty of coal within 25 miles. I have this to say to all: Now is the time to go to Kansas. Land is cheap, and it is being taken up very fast. There is plenty for all at present” (*Commonwealth* 21 Mar. 1879). John Davis, who argued that the state’s stance on slavery attracted African Americans to Kansas, also cited the appeal generated by “the circulars and illustrations of railroad men and land agents, stating the facts and fancies of our fine climate and rich soil” (*Report III*: 226). J. B. Moore wrote such a circular in 1878, the year before the Exodus. He played upon the Republican reputation of Kansas, as well as highlighting her advantages in his circular, *The Republican Valley: Its golden fields, its beautiful farms...Facilities and advantages for those who are looking for homes and farms in our great West* (1). Moore boasted that, “the days of doubt, trial and suffering have passed, and there is not a more contended and prosperous people in America than I find in land of the Jayhawkers” (4). Although Moore did not target African Americans specifically, the rhetoric used would clearly appeal to the African American population of Mississippi, beginning with the title, *The Republican Valley*. “For three successive years,” Moore claimed, newly settled farmers have “grown immense crops of corn, wheat, oats, barley, and vegetables, and the herds of cattle, hogs, sheep, horses and mules are altogether wonderful to see. There is no real poverty anywhere, because there is no such thing as want. The whole state is full of the comforts of life” (7). Moore emphasized the prosperous bounty of crops, something the cotton tenant farmer did not often experience on his rented, worn out

land. He also described a lack of poverty, a foreign concept to the African American Mississippian who was very much in poverty and want. Moore continued, “A home and a farm for a few hundred dollars. And a large farm, too. A full *one hundred and sixty* acres . . . it is easy to make a start here” (10). Using an image far too familiar to the African American tenant farmer in Mississippi, Moore disparaged those who have sought to influence “many a good, industrious and honest renter of high-priced lands in other States (when the year’s crops would barely pay the rent) from packing his goods, and with his hard-working wife and family, coming to this beautiful valley and getting him a cheap farm of his own, where every hours’ work pays 20% interest” (14).

Newspapers from Kansas also made their way down South, to proclaim the virtues of Kansas. *The Colored Citizen* of Topeka openly encouraged the Exodus of blacks from the Deep South, as illustrated by an article titled, “COME WEST” (30 Nov. 1878). In Kansas, it claimed, “there remains thousands upon thousands of untilled acres of the richest and best soil in the world lying open in the glorious West for the people to come and take it, work it” (30 Nov. 1878). Few newspapers or circulars represented Kansas negatively. Those that did were in Kansas, not Mississippi. The *Daily Times* in Leavenworth was one of few newspapers to assert that “utterly false representations” were being made to African Americans, who were “made to believe that the state of Kansas gives 40 acres of land and a mule to every Negro family that will settle in Kansas” (7 Mar. 1879). However false or accurate the claims of the circulars and newspapers may have been, the appeal of cheap, abundant, profitable, and fertile land held great appeal to the African American tenant farmer who did not own his own land and barely made enough to even grow a crop the next year. Such grand promises to a people in such a dire situation created a scenario that was predisposed to result in the mass exodus that it did. The promise of land pulled many Exodusters to Kansas in the late nineteenth century.

Finally, African Americans in Mississippi were pushed to Kansas because of violence, a loss of political voice, and an inability to gain economic advances; but they were also drawn to Kansas because of its history as the land of freedom in the United States and the promise of abundant land. A song of peculiar interest illustrates the combination of push *and* pull factors that influenced so many African Americans to

pack up their family and leave the only home many of them had ever known for a land they had never seen. Published in Chicago and written by Frank J. Smith, “A Native Hossier,” the song entitled “Whar De Shot Gun Rules no Mo’e” highlighted the African American’s flee from violence in the South to Kansas, a land of peace:

**Whar De Shot Gun Rules no Mo’e**

1. De day’s ben long, de night’s be dark,  
De furnace heat burn’d high,  
Since ‘pression’s yoke de good Lo’d broke,  
By word from out de sky.

**Chorus**

But now we’s gwine, can no mo’e wait – To de happy sun-down  
sho’e.

But now we’s gwine, can no mo’e wait – To de happy sun’down  
sho’e.

De land dey call de Kansas state What de shot-gun rules no mo’e.  
De land dey call de Kansas state What de shot-gun rules no mo’e.

2. We’s waited long, we’s toil’d an’ prayed,  
For safety in our home,  
De rifle crack it answer back,  
“De Ku Klux now am come.”

**Chorus**

3. Dey call us freed men ‘fore de law,  
But gibs us cruel hate –  
De ballet box am all a hoax,  
In most dem Soud’ren State

**Chorus**

4. On ‘lection day, dey hunts us down,  
An’ tries to cut our throat,

For bein' roun' dem whit-trash town,  
An' spectin' we mout vote.

**Chorus**

5. From cotton field, an' cabin too,  
De cry ob blood am come –  
Oh Lo'd! do see d'y chil'n flee,  
To flee dah rest an' home - Oh, yes!

**Chorus**

6. Far'well, oh Souf', de land we lub'd,  
We's lef' you clean dis time,  
Our tears an' blood have soak'd yo'r sod,  
We seek de better clime. Oh yes!

With so many significant factors pushing African Americans from Mississippi and pulling them to Kansas, the Exodus seemed almost inevitable. In Mississippi, the freedom that followed emancipation had not been what so many African Americans expected. But just as that freedom had not been what they expected, Kansas was not always what was expected. Many would return home or seek a home in another state outside of the South. But after the oppression following Democratic Redemption in Mississippi in 1875, many African Americans craved the freedom promised ten years earlier. Many came to the point that “they said they would rather go into the open prairie and starve there than go back to the South to stand the impositions that were put on them down there” (*Report II*: 292). Some may question the value of such freedom if it resulted in a “condition [that] was such as to excite the sympathy of any person who saw them” (*Report II*: 290). But Captain Vassar, a white man, testified that in Mississippi the black man could not be called a citizen by any observer because “no man is a citizen who is entitled to the protection of chartered privileges which are virtually denied him through threats of violence and intimidation” (Senate 1879: 715). The value of such struggles lies in his observation that “freedom, when experimentally compared to slavery, whether of prejudice, person,

or estate; whether clothed in rags or fine linens; whether fed on bread and water or the sumptuous fare of the millionaire, encourages hope, stimulates pride of worth, consoles in disappointments, and soothes the pathway of life, whether traveling up or down hill” (Senate 1879: 716). Although freedom had been nominally granted in Mississippi, few felt any of the benefits of such freedom. Kansas appeared to hold the chance to regain that freedom experienced more than ten years earlier. Hundreds of African Americans would set out on a journey to attain that freedom at any cost. Some would succeed and some would fail, but all sought a land where their dignity and humanity would no longer be denied.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> United States Senate Select Committee, *Report and Testimony of the Select Committee of the United States Senate to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes from the Southern States to the Northern States in Three Parts* (1880). Hereafter I will cite this document parenthetically in the text as *Report*.

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