



THE EMANCI- PATION CIRCUIT

BLACK ACTIVISM FORGING A CULTURE OF FREEDOM

"A masterpiece." —ROBIN D. G. KELLEY

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DAVIS

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Praise for *My Confederate Kinfolk: A Twenty-First Century Freedwoman Discovers Her Roots*

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“In her engaging new book, Thulani Davis . . . provides a vivid portrait of her African American and white forebears, people who crossed paths in war, in work, in slavery, in freedom, and, finally, in love. . . . The book weaves these disparate, intimate histories into one compelling tale and gives us, at the same time, a detailed and lively rendering of Reconstruction. . . . Readers will joyfully discover that [Davis] really is both a genealogist and a tamer of history.”—DENISE NICHOLAS, *The Washington Post*

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“[Davis’s] very personal story opens poignant perspectives on an American past where identity was both more and less than black-and-white.”—THOMAS J. DAVIS, *Library Journal*

“In telling the story of her search for ancestors that began with old letters, the writings of her grandmother and a strange photograph of a black child of the 19th century completely decked out in authentic tartan plaid, Davis also documents the condition of blacks making the transition from bondage to Emancipation as freedmen and freedwomen.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

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**THE
EMANCIPATION
CIRCUIT**

BUY

THE EMANCI- PATION CIRCUIT

BLACK ACTIVISM FORGING A CULTURE OF FREEDOM

THULANI DAVIS

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For

Gerri Hollins

(1947–2012)

*Friend, founder of the
Contraband Society*

Ntozake Shange

(1948–2018)

Joyous advocate and inspiration

Joseph Jarman

(1937–2019)

Fierce dharma messenger

George Floyd

(1973–2020)

Mighty human being

this little light o' mine

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CONTENTS

xi	LIST OF MAPS	xiii	LIST OF TABLES
xv	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		
i	Introduction: Black Political Thought as Shaped in the South		
19	1 Flight: Movement Matters		
44	2 The Emancipation Circuit: A Road Map		
80	3 Virginia: Assembly		
109	4 North Carolina: Custody		
133	5 South Carolina: Majority		
165	6 Georgia: Mobilization		
196	7 Florida: Faction		
217	8 Alabama: Redemption		
243	9 Louisiana: Societies		
269	10 Mississippi: Bulldoze		
294	11 Arkansas: Minority		
321	Conclusion: What Lives On Is Black Political Thought		
345	NOTES	393	TABLE SOURCE NOTES
397	BIBLIOGRAPHY	427	INDEX



LIST OF MAPS

FIGURE 2.1	Map Showing the Distribution of the Slave Population of the Southern States of the United States Compiled from the Census of 1860
MAP 2.1	The Emerging Emancipation Circuit in the 1860s and 1870s

COLOR PLATES

ALABAMA (plate 1)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. 1867 Constitutional Convention and 1868–74 General Assembly2. 1875–83 General Assembly3. 1884–1970 Legislature
ARKANSAS (plates 2 and 3)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. 1868 Constitutional Convention and 1868–75 General Assembly2. 1877–87 General Assembly3. 1888–93 General Assembly4. 1893–1973 General Assembly
FLORIDA (plates 4 and 5)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. 1868 Constitutional Convention and 1868–76 General Assembly2. 1877–89 General Assembly3. 1890–1968 General Assembly
GEORGIA (plates 6 and 7)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. 1867–68 Constitutional Convention2. 1868–70 General Assembly3. 1871–73 General Assembly4. 1878–1907 General Assembly



LOUISIANA (plates 8 and 9)

1. 1868 Constitutional Convention and 1868–72 General Assembly
2. 1874–79 General Assembly
3. 1880–92 General Assembly
4. 1895–1967 General Assembly

MISSISSIPPI (plates 10 and 11)

1. 1868 Constitutional Convention
2. 1869–75 General Assembly
3. 1877–87 General Assembly
4. 1896–1967 General Assembly

NORTH CAROLINA
(plates 12 and 13)

1. 1868 Constitutional Convention and 1868–72 General Assembly
2. 1873–79 General Assembly
3. 1890–99 General Assembly
4. 1900–1969 General Assembly

SOUTH CAROLINA
(plates 14 and 15)

1. 1868 Constitutional Convention and 1868–73 General Assembly
2. 1874–76 General Assembly
3. 1877–87 General Assembly
4. 1888–97 General Assembly
5. 1890–1902 General Assembly and Turn-of-the-Century County Formations

VIRGINIA (plate 16)

1. 1867–68 Constitutional Convention
2. 1869–90 General Assembly
3. 1891–1967 General Assembly

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PRESS

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 3.I	Virginia Emancipation Circuit, 1870–90	106
TABLE 4.I	North Carolina Emancipation Circuit, 1870–1900	130
TABLE 5.I	South Carolina Emancipation Circuit, 1868–1900	162
TABLE 6.I	Georgia Emancipation Circuit, 1870–1900	193
TABLE 7.I	Florida Emancipation Circuit, 1870–1900	214
TABLE 8.I	Alabama Emancipation Circuit, 1870–1900	240
TABLE 9.I	Louisiana Emancipation Circuit, 1870–1900	266
TABLE 10.I	Mississippi Emancipation Circuit, 1870–1900	291
TABLE 11.I	Arkansas Emancipation Circuit, 1870–1900	319

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INTRODUCTION

Black Political Thought as Shaped in the South

The Colored People are crazily fond of organization.

—*American Missionary* 41, no. 2 (April 1887)

In one description of the place in history to be held by the events in the southern civil rights movement, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. wrote: “Seen in perspective, the summer of 1963 was historic partly because it witnessed the first offensive in history launched by Negroes along a broad front. The heroic but spasmodic and isolated slave revolts of the antebellum South had fused, more than a century later, into a simultaneous, massive assault against segregation.”¹ This magical fusing of slave revolts into the “massive assault” of the 1960s may seem odd now, except that it reveals how little even King and other leading activists of his day were able to really know about the Black past. King was, I believe, at pains to make this connection as his book was published on the one hundredth anniversary of emancipation.

The anniversary was an occasion on which many African American thinkers pondered the connection between the civil rights movement underway and its possible legacy and debt to the enslaved and the first generations to become citizens of this country. James Baldwin weighed the century’s meaning as well in *The Fire Next Time*, asking: “How can the American Negro past be used?” He, in turn, evoked W. E. B. Du Bois’s

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identification of the centrality of “the color line” at the outset of the twentieth century.² At the time, there was one recently published book covering the broad scope of African American history, published the previous year. I would assume King and Baldwin read it along with millions of us anxious to know about our history because, as a general readership book, it was a first. Lerone Bennett’s *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America, 1619–1962* put into popular parlance the fact that Africans were here before the 1620 settler landing at Plymouth Rock. Malcolm (X) Shabazz probably read it too, as he was known to refer to the Plymouth Rock landing and quip that “we didn’t land on Plymouth Rock, the rock was landed on us.”³ I read Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* in the 1960s, and I would guess King and Shabazz did as well, only because there was so little reliable information (as Du Bois points out) and because it was by Du Bois.⁴

Yet King’s conviction that the long civil rights movement of the twentieth century was the first “offensive” on “a broad front” is roughly what many high school students are taught today. Some students I have taught were also under the impression that change was begun and *completed* by the mid-twentieth-century activism. Thanks in part to the work of King and many other Black southerners who built movements and freedom schools across the South, and other movements across the nation, several generations of historians were moved to create a body of work that is filling in the gap King wanted to close between his time and the long past of generations trapped in the slave system. In 1972, Angela Davis made a specific call for scholarship to expose the resistance and rebellion against the slave system obscured in the historiography of the Black past.⁵

The main proposition of my contribution to this lacuna is that the first offensive in history launched by Negroes “along a broad front” was begun by the enslaved during the Civil War, and that its connections to later movements are (1) a heritable oral regime of knowledge on building social and political formations, and (2) the sustained need to access organizing skills and groups due to the continued lack of protections against systemic injustice and routine violence. I argue that in fact King’s “Beloved Community” is very old. Those of us who have spent our lives in its demanding, restoring, and empowering embrace in fact inherited it from churches, teachers in segregated schools, and old folks who told stories never written down.

The Emancipation Circuit: Black Activism Forging a Culture of Freedom contributes to the literature of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction by focusing on grassroots organizing among African Americans and studying

activist organizing as a heritable facet of cultural continuity. It proposes further that the study of Black southern resistance is an excavation of geographical circuits at one level and of an intricate infrastructure of social networks at the most local level, tailoring struggle to specific needs. Owing to the military occupation in the South from 1865 to 1877, freedpeople often asked for federal troops to put down violence—with mixed results—and they did what King would later do, appealed to the US Congress and the president of the United States. In making an analysis of Black political drives over the second half of the nineteenth century, this project proposes that the “long arc” of Black movements begins and continues through the nineteenth century, and it lays the groundwork for looking at the continually evolving regional agendas in the Black South that would be marginalized at the turn of the twentieth century by the efforts to form a national civil rights agenda, national unions, and national hierarchies in religious and social institutions.⁶

Along the Eastern Seaboard and the Mississippi Delta, organizing centers began to emerge with the liberation and flight of slaves during the Civil War. The self-liberation, or emancipation by flight, of at least 400,000 enslaved people, followed by the emancipation of the rest of the four million Blacks in the South, produced new social formations within a region already marked by uneven development. For most African Americans, emancipation was begun without assistance and created the need to develop resources from within communities to provide all the benefits and services commonly available in other regions—or in the South, for whites—either by purchase or from municipal agencies: housing, food, clothing, access to water and sewerage, jobs, medical service, education, policing, roads, sites for spiritual practice, and entertainment. I show that Black communities attempted to meet this broad range of community-building needs through a wide array of grassroots organizations and a capacious sense of the political. I believe the diverse efforts by millions of freedpeople to seek safety from the slave system, and later to exercise citizenship rights, constituted the first mass Black movement in the United States and that it was built in active connection with allies across the region and in conscious awareness of acting as a collectivity.⁷

The Emancipation Circuit situates the emergence of African American community organizing in the postemancipation South along a route trafficked by cotton bales and hogsheads of sugar and tobacco, and establishes that a long history of local organizing left progressive veins running through states that remained stubbornly conservative over time. The

communities on this route—both urban and rural—were subject to multiple layers of organizing over two or more generations. The circuits in the southern states constituted a network I call the Emancipation Circuit, which was built by community ties among Blacks after the war and elaborated by activists, missionaries, and teachers—circuit riders who moved from one newly free community to another, advocating for constitutional rights, self-reliance, electoral structures, and literacy and petitioning for redress. Starting in the 1880s, the circuit became the route for populist and union organizers, as well as blues singers and preachers moving locally in the Mississippi Delta, and in the 1890s for Black press distribution around the South, and in the early 1900s for Garvey organizers, minstrels, and tent show divas like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

Stephanie Camp's adaptation of Edward Said's term *rival geography* has proved useful in describing the practice of enslaved people redefining local geography as they resisted containment by the slave system. As Camp explains, "The rival geography was not a settled spatial formation, for it included quarters, outbuildings, woods, swamps, and neighboring farms as chance granted them. Where planters' mapping of their farms was defined by fixed places for enslaved residents, the rival geography was characterized by motion: the movement of bodies, objects, and information within and around plantation space."⁸ Clearly, *rival geography* could also describe the escape routes used by runaways. Still, it is important to distinguish the Emancipation Circuit from the circuit Blacks built inside the slave system (and the Native American trail system they sometimes used) and the inland routes of the Underground Railroad. The Emancipation Circuit uses much more direct routes between southern places, whereas the others served the desire for secrecy.

The Emancipation Circuit could be described as a system of regional networks built on labor sites and shipping routes with local routes that created ties between communities as well as ties to other networks. Importantly, though, it was a circuit born of abolition. It was made possible by the presence of US military, during the war and after, and by the opportunity fugitive settlements provided for holding meetings and large assemblies, setting up schools, and conducting prayer meetings. The camps in which fugitives first settled became sites of what Katherine McKittrick terms *oppositional spatial practices*, due to the sheer numbers involved, the fact that they were often on contestable ground not owned by slaveholders, and the access to new information. As she points out, "Traditional geographies did, and arguably still do, require black displacement, black

placelessness, black labor, and a black population that submissively stays ‘in place.’”⁹ The mass movement to camps and spontaneous settlements created the opposite conditions from those in which space for community was usually created. The fugitive settlements and camps set up during the war laid the groundwork for the dissemination of information on citizenship, governance, and collective histories, despite the fact that the military and missionaries were prioritizing all able workers returning to labor. The oppositional practices of the refugees turned the camps into hubs for activists to hear and to share collective notions around blackness that united thousands who had not necessarily been neighbors in the slave system. The tremendous thirst for information and the diverse forms of information needed, from sources of survival to the whereabouts of missing loved ones to literacy, naturally caused meeting agendas to build a capacious sense of community and mobilizations to construct. Finally, because most people were fugitives living in near-combat situations, they created communities and groups highly motivated to move on actionable information.

This work differs from much of the Reconstruction historiography in asserting that such a widespread geographical circuit was created and was a social and political achievement of the four million seeking to define freedom after abolition. The circuit is an achievement that emerged as a product of displacement during the Civil War and emancipation, created by people defined by overt fugitive status, and characterized by the understandings people had of being fugitive, of displacement, and of fugitive status provoking policing and resistance. After emancipation, these understandings persisted and informed how Reconstruction was built on the local level. The circuit was shaped by people seeing freedom through the prism of slavery, flight from slavery, and the conditions of displacement and statelessness that were the first realities of abolition.

I contend that what they built proved durable and renewable. It is apparent that community organizing among freedpeople was social in nature and that social reproduction took place in the creation of institutions supporting newly autonomous families, and in the processes of creating institutions in an environment of policing and opposition that elided differences between the political and criminal, or action regarded as “offensive” to “southern culture.” The reproduction of tactics used in hostile environments proved renewable—out of necessity—in later political and social development. The means by which the people on the Emancipation Circuit struggled for citizenship and justice also immediately affected others coming into the country as alternative labor forces, such as Asians

and Italians, who raised more new questions of statelessness, citizenship, and belonging. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, legacies of the first free generation, have spurred voting rights activism ever since. Members of Congress cited the Fifteenth, during the summer of 2021, in objection to recent voter repression measures in states, reading aloud section 1: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”¹⁰

The Emancipation Circuit was a route for the circulation of ideas about citizenship, workers’ demands, and contending with racial violence—or cotton prices, political meetings, and revivals—as well as evolving Black views on labor, gender, and the prospects for something better, literally or metaphorically, down the line. The phrase *down the line* encapsulates the view of long-term struggle ignited during the Civil War, if not by the slave system. Many of us have heard the phrase for decades, maybe in church, where it can mean “in the sweet by and by,” or in a union hall, but in the late nineteenth century the railroads gave “down the line” a place in the nearer future and in geography. Word no longer just passed down the line of the cotton rows and from quarter to quarter but from depot to flag stop. While the Underground Railroad and its “freedom train” had separated the fortunate from the slavery system, mobility in freedom connected southern African Americans to each other, and “down the line” meant possible futures.

This work focuses on the process by which freedpeople engaged citizenship and built a palimpsest of layers of organizing structures that allowed the continued pursuit of community interests after Reconstruction, often movements that happened across the region. The diverse forms of equality that freedmen and freedwomen sought from emancipation proved elusive and, even in the most successful struggles, transient—such as with the right to vote. The freedoms they strove for proved fugitive in much the same sense that Sheldon Wolin describes democracy: “a mode of being that is conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily, but . . . a recurrent possibility as long as the memory of the political survives.” The freedoms sought were elusive because they required a full exercise of democracy, a reality hampered by “the peculiarity of democratic liberty that it shields antidemocratic forms of power.”¹¹ We still struggle as a society for the full exercise of democracy that might prevent the constant marginalization of rights gained before, such as the right for all citizens to vote.

In the case of freedpeople, “the memory of the political” that survived was, as one of my students put it to me, “a new knowledge regime.” That memory of the political contained the tools for mobilizing communities, tools kept alive in subsequent drives described in this study. In turn, that new knowledge regime created new possible futures, including awareness of the need for freedoms not envisioned by earlier activists and new language with which to call out the contemporary “changing same.” Organizing creates new knowledge regimes, which, in turn, unleash new possible futures.¹² The efforts of freedpeople to participate in society as citizens brought antidemocratic forces into full battle mode, despite the exhaustion, deprivation, and suffering among all southerners that had not yet been calculated at the end of the Civil War. Nothing freedpeople hoped to achieve could happen quickly in that unsettled and violent landscape; long-term vision had to be part of their calculation. It meant teaching the next generation to prepare to play a role, which became foundational to political and spiritual teaching in Black communities. A circuit of resistance over time can be a thickly layered manuscript that helps keep alive the memory of the political and lays a groundwork of knowledge that makes efforts at democracy “a recurrent possibility.” Freedpeople distinguished themselves by acting as though that possibility could recur. Even in an age of pessimism the codex of Black political theory persists. It is one of the most profound legacies of slavery survivors to the country.

The first intervention in this book is to show ways in which Black political thought developed in sites along this circuit during the war and in the postemancipation era. African Americans on the circuit deployed mass participatory democracy, producing leadership from the laboring class that worked in counterpoint to and in partnership with Black elites. They created organic venues where women voiced their concerns and political agendas were more egalitarian in gender terms than indicated in much of the early scholarship of the period.¹³

The second intervention examines the possibility that the foundational structures for community building and activism of all sorts emerged from a matrix of early benevolent societies and trade associations with overlapping membership and local roots.¹⁴ These associations, more numerous than the churches thought to be the primary basis of Black southern civil rights organizing, seem to have been developed at three different periods. A few burial societies were established by free Blacks in antebellum years in a number of the circuit sites to acquire land for cemeteries, since freedpeople could not be buried in public cemeteries or plantation sites

where enslaved people had been buried. After the war, a wave of mutual aid society development occurred in response to local needs, which varied by region in some specifics but always included aid to the poor, access to medical treatment, and building schools. A third stage, representing the fullest period of society development and activity, began after the end of the Freedmen's Bureau operations in the South in 1872 and included popular demands of Black churches to build societies to aid the poor and/or set up loan associations for the purchase of land. By the 1880s and 1890s these entities were widely referred to as "secret societies" by white southerners, but even during Reconstruction in the 1870s, when Black meetings and organizing were suppressed, such groups were secretive by necessity *because* they were political or engaged in labor issues, and because they were *profiled as political* even if they were not. This is the remnant of overt fugitive status and ground-level awareness of the continuation of freedom's fugitive status.

Black political thought in former slave societies begins with the problem of being outside of the body politic. Although, tragically, this remained true in the American South for all but a handful of years until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the entrance of freedpeople into public life in the 1860s presented an array of legal conundrums in a system that had not made time to inscribe Black humanity into the state and federal statutes. I have attempted to locate sites where Blacks produced space for discourse and organizing by following records of missionaries and activists who observed and participated in early Black political discourse and by observing the geographical factors that eased or complicated communications and organizing. I contend that the production of space to effect political thought and action was a continued necessity from the end of the Civil War into the twentieth century. Quite often the production of space for mass participatory democracy—the typical process among southern Blacks for arriving at community consensus—involved armed defense of the gatherings. Seeing this process through the lens of slavery, Blacks protected their ability to practice thinking out loud.

Enslaved people in the early days of the United States easily apprehended what was otherwise perhaps best known by the founders—that the republic declared in 1776, drawing "just Powers from the Consent of the Governed," was then, and would remain for some time, more idea than fact. Without ending slavery, this nation was an unexecuted idea not only owing to its raw, unconstructed nascency but because the idea of the governed was narrower than reality. People in bondage in the late eighteenth

century may not have learned much of European nations ruled more by inheritance than ideals, but like others who lived through the Revolutionary era, they were witnesses to the war here to place “Principles” ahead of “Despotism” and the recipients of rumors about another revolution—one that aimed to free enslaved people in Haiti. Enslaved people were bearers, nurses, and porters of these revolutionary ideas, passing along judgment of both the justice and the romance of the idea of a society honoring rights for all. The thirteen-year bloody siege that declared a nation free of slavery in Saint-Domingue in 1804 (and prompted the end of slavery in the British West Indies) confirmed for many that the inchoate definition of all people being “created equal” and “endowed by their Creator” with unalienable rights in the United States could be elaborated in fact.

The Black Atlantic worldview, informed by news of the Haitian Revolution and antislavery ideologies, was in part articulated by a son of Carolina coastal ports. David Walker was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, among watermen during the long struggle in Haiti, and he spent some years in Charleston as well. His *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* (1829) shows a Black Atlantic outrage shared by many Blacks over the suffering wrought by slavery that was seldom heard by most Americans and reflects connection to republican and antislavery discourse in the Atlantic world. A member of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, which had been formed in resistance to prejudicial treatment in northern white churches, Walker also shares his indignation at the propagation of a distorted Christianity hand in hand with the brutality used to maintain the slave system. He also uses biblical narratives familiar to Black congregations in both the North and the South as ancient parallels to the contemporary slave system told in racialized renderings that also claimed Africanness to be ancient. In the Black Atlantic world, the Bible and the ancient world were Blacker than taught in mainstream society. This deployment of the annals of Moses as non-European history was already part of the eighteenth-century Black Masonic movement initiated by Prince Hall in Boston. Within Walker’s four articles are the seeds of Black political argument to come for more than a century from the abolitionists, the Black prophetic ministry, Afrocentrists, nationalists, and radicals advocating self-defense.¹⁵

The influence of Walker’s *Appeal*, delivered to southern ports by various networks including seamen and secret societies, prompted whites to pass laws against the distribution of “incendiary” literature. Walker’s call

to southern Blacks to take action against their oppression was more threatening to southern planters than his argument that Blacks had built the country and had a claim to rights. His harsh shaming of those who would not resist their condition may have been a part of private discourse among Blacks, but it represents a departure from the conventions of northern abolitionist rhetoric. The proximity of the *Appeal's* publication and distribution starting in 1829 to Nat Turner's Rebellion in Virginia in 1831, even without any known connection between the pamphlet and Turner, virtually assured that southern legislators would seek legal punishments for the circulation of such ideas. Ideas of freedom were policed as the property of white society in a country that had never had only one ethnicity. Walker's text would have an additional legacy in the emancipation-era black codes with bans on speech by Blacks that were deemed incendiary, punished by prison terms.

Steven Hahn holds that this mid-eighteenth-century work "reflected intellectual and political currents flowing among African Americans, North and South, since the mid-eighteenth century: democratic-republicanism, millennialism, protonationalism, Pan-Africanism." David Kazanjian states that the *Appeal* points to "the paradoxically simultaneous emergence, toward the end of the eighteenth century, of apparently contradictory discursive practice: universal egalitarianism, on the one hand, and the particularistic hierarchies of race and nation, on the other hand."¹⁶ Paul Gilroy adds that "Walker made the problem of black humanity and related issues of rights—political and human—intrinsic to the issue of world citizenship long before [W. E. B.] Du Bois." And more to the point of those fretting planters and lawmakers: "Walker's plea that blacks be recognized as belonging to the 'human family' was combined with the view that their natural rights had been wrongfully confiscated in the condition of slavery, which could, as a result of their exclusion, be justly overthrown."¹⁷

Walker's rhetorical themes would resonate with Blacks in the North and be elaborated by lettered men who used a form of Black nationalism to consolidate a political base toward unified action in various causes, and they would continue to echo throughout the Black political rhetoric of the nineteenth century. All the strands of political thought identified by Hahn and others as Atlantic currents dating to the eighteenth century, or at least remnants thereof, should be considered part of the world of enslaved people in the ports of the nineteenth-century American slave system and the coastal settlements where fugitives from the slave system took refuge during the Civil War.

Still, it is relevant to look at Cedric Robinson's view of the Black radical tradition making "manifest" a particular consciousness: "It was a consciousness implicated in what Amos Tutuola so many generations later would name 'the bush of ghosts.' . . . the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality." This is a powerful asset that has created movements needed to speak to innumerable places and times. This collective consciousness strikes me as the womb of the Beloved Community.¹⁸

Visualizing Political Formation

The data I have assembled on movements in nine southern states from 1868 to 1900 are collected in this book in tables for each state chapter that demonstrate that the durability of political structures built in Reconstruction was often most apparent in very rural places rather than in urban settings. The geography of Black organizing during Reconstruction also troubles the idea that the Black majority population alone was a determinant of success in achieving representation in political institutions. Rural areas offer consideration of the fact that survival depended on solid community building—churches and ministers had to be shared. Congregations moved together, buried each other, and helped each other get to polls. Building cabins was shared work. Family members lived near each other. In South Carolina, I have seen Black family homes arranged in semicircles across a set of lots held in the family since Reconstruction. The families shared arable land and lumber for construction and made collective childcare available for all the households. In some rural counties, political organizing was taken up as a routine facet of church activity—possibly because churches were available gathering places that could be secured and homes to social structures delegating diverse forms of work. Those areas where Blacks engaged in the most diverse forms of community building seem to have had representation with greater staying power as well. The tables and maps in this study show the continuous turns in organizing over time, from electing officials to labor organizing to "Exoduster" movements, especially after loss of the vote within a given area. The maps in the book show that every state had some Black communities engaged in organizing their counties in concert with neighboring counties.¹⁹

The sustainability or fragility of political organizing in specific places and the systematic effect of violence against those communities is quickly

apprehended by their depiction in the maps created for this book (see plates 1–16). Mapping is a critical practice because putting organizing in space illuminates scattered evidence not necessarily coherent in narratives that blur specific postwar years and obscure ties between African Americans in various communities. Also, the connections between armed poses creating terror against Blacks and legislators creating laws to suppress Black voting are also clearer if looked at geographically. The terrorists were usually in counties with white majorities that were next door to Black voting centers. There are echoes of this reality in news stories today. Though tools for suppressing the Black vote are still in use, Reconstruction is the era in which an array of voter suppression tactics were created and, over time, refined and perfected (without federal interference) to become increasingly comprehensive in their effect. We can see the gradual success of these tactics across southern counties in mapping. These maps showing Black organizing also specifically or indirectly display the geography of white resistance to Black organizing. This illuminates a reality in the terrain that continues across time, and can chart specific developments at specific times.

Those areas where African Americans did not gain representation obviously were regions in which white electoral power was maintained, but most areas where Blacks won places in constitutional conventions or in the state house were also sites where Black organization was matched with a well-organized white political structure and/or contested by white organizing. Black majorities did not go unopposed simply because the numbers suggested a certain outcome. Just as oppression produced Black organization, the potential of Black power, Black challenges to slavery-era laws and conventions, Black voter organizing, and evidence of separate Black churches and schools (or even the more despised integrated schools) all produced white resistance. Maps of Black representation in Reconstruction in fact show areas that were most heavily contested by whites. Coincidentally, any student of twentieth-century southern movements will recognize many of those places as sites of later engagements won and lost, which speaks to the sustainability or renewability of the palimpsest of Black political thought through the social nature of southern Black culture.

The Emancipation Circuit as Text

After abolition, freedpeople were engaged in a complex process of creating space for freedom—space for autonomous living when possible; for political discourse; for redefining gender roles; for education in citizenship;

for intellectual development; and for privacy, family formation, and spiritual life. Rail construction, a great drive for the increase of production and shipping in the South, itself produced new communities and new space as rural Black workers converged on towns with railroad camps, where they planned and built settlements to avail themselves of the jobs and mobility of the new rail lines. The Emancipation Circuit is an alternative way of seeing the postwar southern terrain. If trains carrying freight stopped at every plantation in a Delta county, so too did the African American men handling the bales, along with the news they carried. Along this circuit, even in times of harsh repression, local associations, entertainers, and Black newspapers produced space for struggle, a spatial imaginary where resistance was at least possible, if also necessitating existential choices.

For outsiders coming south to work with freedpeople, especially Black abolitionists, emancipation and Reconstruction opened an important moment of praxis—Black political theory had to move from abolition to creating freedom in a reality not adequately perceived from afar. Though ideas generated by northern Black abolitionists may have informed Black southerners, the views of northern activists of all stripes were deeply disrupted by going to the South after the war. The small group of activists who worked in the South were jolted out of their preconceptions about what forms of aid were most needed, the breadth of the help needed, and the impossibility of political training without attention to the ideas held by freedpeople and the constant threat of violence toward freedpeople and anyone aiding them in moving from liberation to freedom. Many were radicalized, especially African American ministers, steeped in the abolitionist tradition, whether born in the North or the South. It is in the South that Black prophetic ministry begins and builds its expertise and its storied career in mobilization. Reconstruction puts an abolition-based Black political theory into the massive problem of practicing what was preached. This required realistically envisioning new possible futures and literally building structures that enabled such outcomes.

In the chapters that follow, accounts of episodes and individuals, some of them familiar in the historiography of emancipation and Reconstruction, are arranged with particular attention to place and time. This narrative course—moving from Virginia southward along the Atlantic Coast, across the Gulf Coast, and up the Mississippi River's path to Memphis—replicates much of the chronological order of Black flight made possible by Union forces setting up parameters inside of which fugitives from the slave

system expected safety from return to their owners. The overt organizing generally began in each state once the military was at least heard to have arrived and set up camp.

Each chapter of *The Emancipation Circuit* delves into a concept important to understanding Reconstruction. Chapter 1, “Flight: Movement Matters,” introduces the flights from the slavery system set off along the Atlantic Coast and the length of the Mississippi River Valley and the camps to which fugitives fled. I contend that their knowledge of where and how to flee—which they continued to use throughout the war—is embodied in the slavery-era use of “rival geography” and word on the “common wind,” an oral communication network taking varying patterns in different regions. Central to this geography of Black communication networks are waterways as well as local routes used between plantations or for escape or “laying out” from plantations. The chapter also discusses preexisting political theory concerning affinities among fugitives around blackness as they may have been observed by activists in the camps and in local Black societies that came to aid refugees.²⁰ Chapter 2, “The Emancipation Circuit: A Road Map,” gives a view of the fifteen specific elements in play in the emancipation era and Reconstruction period that allowed the building of multiple and sustained periods of mobilization in certain sites around the former Confederacy. These include various factors providing a measure of safety and, with the arrival of teachers and activists, the onset of literacy instruction; citizenship mentoring; access to news; political organizing connections; and later help on pensions, back pay, and legal matters. Most important perhaps were open sites for worship and community meetings, from which arose a new American politics.

Chapters 3 through 11 recount developments from Virginia south along the Atlantic Coast, west through Gulf Coast states and then in the Mississippi River states, Mississippi and Arkansas. These chapters are organized broadly by the arrivals of Union forces in those areas, which in turn triggered mass movements of the enslaved. Some of these military movements were successful, allowing for occupation; others were fleeting, causing enslaved people to follow US troops toward safety. Chapter 3, “Virginia: Assembly,” centers on foundational assemblies of refugees setting out to obtain relief from numerous conditions imposed on fugitives by local white authorities and the military. It details some of the unique facets of these early meetings that also apply to how refugees elsewhere met to think out loud as community. It also emphasizes a pattern of coordinated meetings

between communities over months to form regional collective demands with local specifics.

Chapter 4, “North Carolina: Custody,” looks at fugitives caught in active war areas through the lens of their attempts to retain control of their own bodies and families in the face of military impressment and “apprenticeship” laws allowing former owners to take custody of African American children. North Carolinians illustrate ways in which fugitives organized themselves and made new iterations of the word *we* that reflected the Black experience of the shared disasters of enslavement. When petitioning the government, these same people reflect or remark on their introduction to being called by collective names based on race, such as *the colored people*. While they were trying to identify a new “we,” refugees learned they were being dubbed with a new “they.”

Chapter 5, “South Carolina: Majority,” shows activists encountering each other during the Port Royal Experiment, as well as the electoral power possible with a widespread Black majority population, and the successful resistance to violence and intimidation in coastal areas that was devastating the up-country. South Carolina shows the social nature of the use of rival geography that is the groundwork of the news and movement on the South Carolina circuit, as well as the social nature of labor organizing, which was open to mass action led by women. It also shows the social nature of the reproduction of political ideology and political formations that is characteristic of the Emancipation Circuit.

Chapter 6, “Georgia: Mobilization,” focuses on the state as a site of long-term, inch-by-inch struggle with violent opponents of Black voting. This state epitomizes the effective systematic and geography-based use of terror to defeat Black organizing. Activists in Georgia offer a detailed look at how a few people arriving from the North in the late 1860s and traveling the breadth of the state could organize thousands of people to vote in 1868. Activism in Georgia reveals the methodical teaching and cultivation of a pedagogy on the US Constitution and citizenship rights as it was practiced across much of the South.

Chapter 7, “Florida: Faction,” covers the intense use of divisions created by diverse groups with political ambitions contending for the Black vote, some of which were trying to clear the ground for developers seeking cheap labor with which to build their business plans for the state. Gerrymandering in Florida privileged white majority counties as if to flip the advantage of the “three-fifths clause” to reduce the majority Black vote to three-fifths

its size. Florida points as well to the lasting impacts of disfranchising those convicted of crimes and of successful Black labor organizing for shorter workdays, wage raises, and other state legislation.

Chapter 8, “Alabama: Redemption,” concerns the state with the first Deep South destruction of Reconstruction. Many enslaved people in the state were unable to flee during the war, and yet many others had their enslavement turned into work making munitions and weapons for the Confederacy. With this mix of wartime experience, and the military presence in Selma and Montgomery, the Black Belt became the central byway of activism and political formation across the state. Freedpeople there organized themselves to take advantage of a potential voting majority and became subject to the planter elite deploying race to court Unionist whites away from the radical Republican Party and its support of Black rights. Black Alabamians had at least one lawmaker seek reparations through the legislature and moved quickly into labor organizing and creating farming cooperatives.

Chapter 9, “Louisiana: Societies,” focuses on the early organizing taken up by the elite free Black community, which gave an early radical ideology to the meaning of freedom but was superseded over the long term by the persistent labor and political organizing by African Americans in rural areas. Political and labor actions in Louisiana were subject to a stepped-up use of violent repression marked by the use of large military equipment not seen in other southern states up to that time. Louisiana also is instructive on the value of multiple forms of institution building instilling durable organizing skills in communities.

Chapter 10, “Mississippi: Bulldoze,” centers on freedpeople organizing in a hostile environment in which the US forces in the state during the Andrew Johnson presidency refused to help people on the ground. Black Mississippians succeeded in gaining representation in government only in a context of secret organizing, policed meeting repression, and constant attempts to disarm Black populations. Still, some in Mississippi, who had been displaced by Union attempts to take control of the Mississippi River, were in autonomous communities and redefined collective organizing under the idea of “We the Colored People.” For a short time, the Black majorities in the state did succeed in electing more African American representatives than are serving today, and they kept officeholders for some years after Reconstruction was overthrown.

Chapter 11, “Arkansas: Minority,” explores how the devastation of the state and constant displacement of its people forced Blacks into Union

centers where they were able to organize and seek medical help and education. Their numbers, however, were much smaller than in neighboring states, and Ku Klux Klan terror forced declarations of martial law. A state whose Black population included a large proportion who had migrated there fleeing hardship elsewhere becomes a site of organizing of the new Pentecostal churches and new migration movements.

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The tools for struggle available to freedwomen and freedmen, and even later to Black publics following disfranchisement in the 1870s, have to be viewed in terms of a theory of the political rather than purely in terms of inclusion/exclusion from institutional politics, or as if their struggles were the same as those witnessed since the advent of television and the modern documentary. An appropriate theory of the political for the work of southern Blacks in the nineteenth century can only be arrived at by observing their vision of the role of the state through the prism of slavery, and freedom's sudden demands—which became lasting needs. Too often we bring two biases to the task of seeing their efforts: first, that the twentieth-century movements succeeded by unifying around a single goal such as desegregation of bus lines in Montgomery, Alabama, or passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965; and, second, that success usually meant an effective process that could be repeated. We know, of course, that in some cases southern sheriffs studied the effective twentieth-century methods and functionally counteracted them, and that some other efforts never succeeded. The consciousness that sustains long-term struggle also provides the preservation of successful means and the continuing development of strategies that suit new times. Freedpeople saw the possibilities for the imposition of the terms and conventions of slavery in every facet of society, arenas too numerous to even list, but which placed many of the changes they demanded of the state way ahead of the curve of progressive political thought of their time. We are still doing some of their work.

Autonomy in daily life in fact might rank first among all priorities for freedpeople, but its achievement required much: the right to control one's own body; freedom from random or habitual violence; the tools to produce one's own food and acquire money or property or both; freedom of privacy; freedom of autonomous spiritual practice; freedom from surveillance and arbitrary, racialized policing; participation in governance, including female leadership; access to decent housing; access to health care; access to public space; freedom of expression; freedom of association, privately or

publicly and in groups; and many more. The political demands of slavery survivors produced the study of the body as commodity and legislation aimed at protecting the body from covert or cloaked forms of property in human beings, forcible displacement for labor, protection for the integrity of family as defined by the citizen, and protection from the violence of capital and dehumanizing ideologies. These are the foundations of a politics of universal human rights.

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NOTES

Introduction. Black Political Thought as Shaped in the South

1. King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 106.

2. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 138–39.

3. “Malcolm X warns, ‘It shall be the ballot or the bullet,’ Washington Heights, NY, March 29, 1964,” Malcolm X’s Audubon address from archive.org, accessed August 27, 2020, <http://www.vlib.us/amdocs/texts/malcolmxo364.html>.

4. It is hard to convey the hunger that existed then for information, history, and art on various aspects of human experience such as the Black experience in the United States, and the Americas, the African diaspora, Asian American experience, sexuality (especially homosexuality), and a host of other subjects.

5. Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role,” 81–100.

6. At the same time, I want to also alert the reader that I find the “long civil rights movement” can obscure the phases of the long-term struggle for universal human rights, of which many Black movements have played a part. I think specific terms—such as the 1880s streetcar integration campaigns—that do not limit the inclusion of regional campaigns can help to avoid the misapprehension that there have been long periods of uncontested stasis. The pendulum perhaps swings from the national campaigns such as the effort to get Black soldiers in the Civil War, or the drive for the Black vote, to the urgent and local or statewide concerns, such as asking Homer Plessy in 1892 to take a seat in a whites-only streetcar in New Orleans. He was backed by people who had tried the same thing decades earlier without getting a case to the Supreme Court. Two years before Plessy, Black women organized a streetcar boycott in Atlanta and beat Jim Crow there for a decade. When Ida B. Wells sat in a whites-only train car in Memphis in 1884, she was following on the heels of several other women she knew who had defied the law. Her case got as far as the Tennessee Supreme Court before she was denied justice. Before all of them, Sojourner Truth sued a horse-drawn streetcar company in Washington, DC, for throwing her off a car during the Civil War and she won. It was a battle fought intermittently all over for nearly thirty years before *Plessy v. Ferguson* gave us sixty-four years of Jim Crow streetcars and bus lines. The long arc to Rosa Parks starts in 1865 with Ms. Truth.

7. “By the middle of 1864, as Abraham Lincoln pessimistically contemplated his reelection prospects, nearly 400,000 slaves had rebelled against their masters and

gained a presumptive freedom within Union lines. Their numbers were greatest in the border South and Mississippi Valley states where northern armies had long been conducting operations, and, to a lesser extent, along the Atlantic coast. . . . Substantial sections of interior Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Mississippi; almost all of Georgia, Alabama, Florida and Texas; and sections of Tennessee and Louisiana remained in Confederate hands at least until the war's last months." Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 82–83.

8. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 7.

9. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiv; see also 9 and 1–35.

10. Foner, *Second Founding*, xxv–xxvi; Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, Constitution Annotated, accessed May 24, 2017, <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-15/>.

11. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 43, 41.

12. Thanks to Emily Kristin Hartwig for telling me what I was saying.

13. While the agendas are more similar than dissimilar, I intentionally describe them in the plural, so as to avoid inferring that there was a single Black political agenda, in the sense of a unified southern or national agenda.

14. The term *matrix* here is used to mean "something within which something else originates, develops, or takes form," as well as "an array of circuit elements for performing a specific function as interconnected," per *Webster's*. My usage is meant to suggest both foundational tissue, or template, and a network conducive to organizing.

15. Walker, *David Walker's Appeal*.

16. Hahn, *Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, 45; Kazanjian, *Colonizing Trick*, 2.

17. Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue*, 60–61.

18. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 170. The Tutuola reference is to his 1954 novel, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, the story of a young boy abandoned in a slave raid and left in a forest of spirits for many years before returning to the world of the living. The text was widely read in the 1960s by members of Black cultural nationalist movements.

19. The term *Exoduster movement* is used today to denote several migratory patterns starting in 1879, with thousands of Blacks moving from the South, especially Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Tennessee, to Kansas. People also later moved to Oklahoma. Arkansas, which was at one time a destination, also had Exodusters leave the state.

20. On terminology with regard to those who fled to Union lines, I use both *fugitive* and *refugee*. The vast numbers of government and private documents referring to these enslaved people who were able to flee refer to them as *contrabands*. Occasionally, I do use the term *contraband camp* to distinguish those sites from

settlements or neighborhoods built in the same region by fugitives from slavery. I am aware of the objections posed by historians to replication of the term, which are obvious in its original use for property such as ordnance and even livestock. But historians are also discussing the word because a lot of people use it today. At a conference I attended on the “contrabands,” I met only one descendant of those fugitives who eschewed the term. As a descendant myself, I regularly hear from people researching their families from the early date of entering military records afforded by fleeing to government lines. It has a specificity now that did not exist before due to a general lack of attention to freedpeople as central actors in their own freedom, which many descendants claim as a useful specific.

Chapter 1. Flight: Movement Matters

1. See Scott, “Common Wind”; McKittrick, *Demonic Ground*, xiv.
2. Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 115. On Whitman and the meteor: Kahn, “Solving Walt Whitman’s Meteor Mystery”; Zielinski, “Rare Meteor Event.” On Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, and the poem: Kent Ljungquist, “Meteor of the War.”
3. Goodheart, 1861, 350. On Abraham Lincoln: John Kelly, “Solving Walt Whitman’s Meteor Mystery,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 2014. It was Walt Whitman who documented Lincoln having recalled during the war his sighting of the 1833 Leonid meteor shower: Donald W. Olson and Laurie E. Jasinski, “Abe Lincoln and the Leonids,” *Sky and Telescope*, November 1999.
4. Mary Barbour interview, “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936 to 1938,” North Carolina Narratives, vol. 11, pt. 1, 79–81, accessed June 5, 2013, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/>.
5. Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 50, 63, 74, 142, 199, 205, 213, 218, 250–52. Shackelford’s name in census records is Keziah. *Grapevine* is a common African American term, dating to the slavery era, for the common wind among Blacks; a variation was the *grapevine telegraph*.
6. Susan Schulten, “Visualizing Slavery,” *Opinionator*, *New York Times*, December 9, 2010.
7. Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 14–15; Berlin et al., *Free at Last*, 9–11; Goodheart, 1861, 296–303, 312–15, 317–18. Thavolia Glymph has argued that these people should really be referred to as “contrabandists, active participants in the war and in their own fate, rather than as contraband, passive prizes of war.” Glymph, “‘This Species of Property,’” 58. The term has endured and is often embraced by their descendants, as they have told me, because it is well known. Glymph’s term, *contrabandists*, is useful.
8. Those from states not in the Confederacy were technically still fugitives until state laws changed, or until passage of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery. Maryland ended slavery in 1864 and Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee in 1865.