Demonstration Dwellings: Building Racial Capitalism and Economic Cooperation in New Deal Housing, 1933–1942

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Demonstration Dwellings: Building Racial Capitalism and Economic Cooperation in New Deal Housing, 1933–1942

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the School of Architecture in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Environmental Design

by

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in 1933, the United States federal government initiated a series of historic investments in the nation’s housing infrastructure. Propelled by the convergence of the Great Depression and the Great Migration, New Deal administrators commissioned a network of segregated residential prototypes to operate as replicable models for private industry. At the core of the discriminatory program was the creation and circulation of federally-insured debt. Reading across federal records, correspondence circuits, and contemporaneous Black journals and newspapers, this thesis revisits struggles for land, property, and Black participation in the emergent housing-based economy. It explores the distributed networks within which the Black entrepreneurialism of figures like architect Hilyard R. Robinson and economist Robert C. Weaver variously clashed and congealed with the Black radicalism of historian W. E. B. Du Bois and the white socialism of the Regional Planning Association of America. Caught between conflicting frameworks of racial capitalism and economic cooperation, the model housing developments became rehearsal spaces for a renewed engine of accumulation and dispossession.

The inquiry is organized around case studies that investigate the role of New Deal housing within a racial economy of value. An introduction considers the home as an apparatus charged with ameliorating a crisis of overaccumulation and redistributing its attendant forms of economic surplus. Chapter 1 examines the administration of cooperative communities in the Black Belt region of Alabama alongside W. E. B. Du Bois’ Depression-era proposal for a separatist cooperative society. Chapter 2 documents Aberdeen Gardens in Hampton, Virginia, considering the plot system underlying the subsistence settlement and the legacy of “racial uplift” domestic pedagogy at the
neighboring Hampton Institute. Chapter 3 describes the translation of Ebenezer Howard’s garden city morphology within the all-white suburb of Greenbelt, Maryland, the simultaneous construction of the all-Black Langston Terrace Dwellings in Washington, D.C., and the provision of a white wage within the utopian socialist-inspired community. An epilogue reflects upon the New Deal’s archival forms and the epistemic violence inscribed in state records.
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INTRODUCTION

Houses are unsettling hybrid structures. A house is, in all its figurings, always thing, domain, and meaning—home, dwelling, and property; shelter, lodging, and equity; roof, protection, and aspiration. . . . A house is a juridical-economic-moral entity that, as property, has material . . . political . . . and symbolic . . . value. Houses, as such, refer to the three main axes of modern thought: the economic, the juridical, and the ethical, which are, as one would expect, the registers of the modern subject.

—Paula Chakravarty and Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt”

In mid-July of 1934, Hilyard R. Robinson arrived in the coastal shipbuilding city of Newport News, Virginia. The Washington, D.C.-based architect, who had been appointed to head the design of a subsistence homestead community on behalf of the Department of Interior, embarked on the visit as soon as 100 applications by prospective residents had been received.\(^1\) His objective was to locate a site suitable for the garden city-style development, which had, in just a matter of weeks, outgrown the initial plot of land acquired for the project—slated to be the first of its kind in the nation.\(^2\) The original proposal for 25 homes quickly swelled to 158 in response to an outpouring of interest by community members, church leaders, and local civic organizations. It would take nearly another year and a round of bureaucratic reshuffling in the nation’s capital before the “barren” 200-acre parcel would be formally purchased and construction on the three-, four-, and five-room dwellings commenced.\(^3\) Matching the historic nature of the commission, the first federal housing contract to be awarded to an all-Black architectural team, was the program of the model development itself: a rent-to-own cooperative

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community with newly available Federal Housing Administration-backed mortgages offered to qualifying Black families at a fraction of the overall building cost. The project, internally titled SH-VA-10, would come to be known as Aberdeen Gardens.

The selection of Robinson as lead architect was carefully calibrated in accordance with both the stated and unstated priorities of the New Deal’s budding “creative government.” Robinson had completed his education in architecture at Columbia University, where he became the school’s first Black graduate in 1924, lending him credibility among the ranks of Ivy League technocrats from which the New Deal administration was disproportionately culled. He proceeded to tour the modernist housing developments of Germany, Austria, and England from 1931 to 1932 and, further influenced by the sociological methods of historian W. E. B. Du Bois, returned to Washington, D.C. to study the dwelling conditions of the nation’s ill-housed “one-third.” The resulting report ultimately brought him to the attention of federal officials who had been tasked with soliciting “Negro participation” in a program of slum clearance and low-cost housing construction. That Robinson's own publicly-expressed views on housing reform vacillated between a conception of racial betterment premised upon the cultivation of “architectural taste” and an appeal for European-style social housing design as a prescription for “more abundant living” likely served to enhance his perceived suitability for the position.

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Notwithstanding Robinson’s groundbreaking appointment, plans for the all-Black agrarian community initially drew a chorus of criticism from progressives and conservatives alike. In a searing 1933 press release responding to early reports of the homestead program, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) asserted that “the greatest menace to colored people is contained in the plan to have the government itself establish separate Negro colonies.” Recognizing the insidious mechanisms through which federal construction would effectively extend the reach of Jim Crow, the organization warned of the precedent that the model development would set for segregation as “the proper method for handling colored people.”

Meanwhile, Depression-era adherents to the South’s “whites first” policy contended that any government spending on housing for Black residents was a misuse of taxpayer money. A coalition of Virginia business owners lobbied federal officials to convert the homes to white occupancy.

Wading into the conflagration, W. E. B. Du Bois exerted a decisive influence on the Assistant Director of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, Clarence E. Pickett. Staking a position that anticipated The Crisis editor’s impending schism with the NAACP, he publicly relayed,

I have thought this matter over with great care, and I see no other way out so long as race prejudice in the South is what we all know it is; the continued subordination of Negroes to whites who will neither accept them as equals or give them justice must stop. Segregation by race, which is the practical alternative, has

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9 Press Service of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, “Homestead Plan Declared Effort at Segregation,” November 17, 1933.
its great and threatening disadvantages; but for the Black farmer in the South, it is the next and only step.\textsuperscript{12}

Du Bois’ seeming reversal on the question of “voluntary segregation” reflected his growing disillusionment with the political process and increasing distrust of white workers as the uneven economic fallout from the Great Depression reached a crescendo.\textsuperscript{13} His accompanying plea for an independent cooperative economy—what he would term “a nation within the nation”—bore at least passing resemblance to the Black separatist communities known as “freedom colonies” that Booker T. Washington had championed in decades prior.\textsuperscript{14}

Apparently afforded cover by Du Bois’ public admonition, Pickett resolved to proceed with the prototype community. In spite of controversy surrounding the development and efforts by white opponents to derail construction, within a few years of its completion it was acknowledged, by some metrics, to be a resounding success.\textsuperscript{15} With the aid of a modest $5,000 federal loan, the residents of Aberdeen Gardens self-organized shared infrastructure of economic survival in the form of a consumers’ cooperative, enabling them to secure and maintain a financial hold on their homes at rates far surpassing those of other New Deal communities in the region.\textsuperscript{16} Ultimately, Aberdeen Gardens resisted reductive classification, sitting ambiguously between the Black radical tradition of economic cooperation and state-sanctioned efforts toward the legitimation of

\textsuperscript{12} Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Clarence E. Pickett, November 29, 1933, Box 4, Correspondence Concerning Proposed Subsistence Homesteads Projects, 1933–1935, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
\textsuperscript{13} Elliott M. Rudwick, “Du Bois’s Last Year as Crisis Editor,” The Journal of Negro Education 27, no. 4 (1958): 531.
racial difference and hierarchy. As a zone of refuge in Jim Crow Virginia, the experiment posed possibilities of flight from the Southern plantation economy, yet remained constitutively tethered to the racializing structures of apartheid governance. Perhaps not coincidentally, it would be the only of 30 similarly conceived projects that the short-lived Division of Subsistence Homesteads ever brought to fruition. Plans for 29 other Black-led developments were unceremoniously shelved, withdrawn, and abandoned. Likewise, the agency’s nominally integrated developments were in practice reserved for “native white stock.”

In communities on the other side of the “color line,” however, a burgeoning and heterogeneous program of federally-funded housing development took root. The advent of the New Deal injected an infusion of state funding into the flagging market for residential construction, inaugurating an administrative environment in which Keynesian experiments in housing production proliferated. Within this milieu, a cadre of architects, planners, and reformers vied for influence, seizing upon the opportunity to advance their respective visions for the social and technological dimensions of mass-produced housing. Far from a panegyric or modernist genealogy, the ensuing study positions these professionals as credentialed technicians laboring on behalf of, while sometimes exceeding or transgressing, the political and economic imperatives of the crisis-stricken nation-state. Operating across a suite of newly minted agencies—including the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (1933), the Public Works Administration (1933), the Division of Subsistence Homesteads (1933), the Federal Housing Administration (1934),

the Resettlement Administration (1935), and the Farm Security Administration (1937)—the ambitious state endeavor would fund the construction of 158 federal housing projects over the course of its first four years, totaling $252 million.\(^{20}\) Moreover, the uneven program of infrastructural modernization would derive structural coherence from its deployment of a corroborating racial schema. The differential valuation of human lives was spatialized across a gradient of residential prototypes, ranging from “sentimental” back-to-the-land resettlement initiatives to “progressive” high-modernist utopias.\(^{21}\)

At the core of the unprecedented program was the creation and circulation of federally-insured debt. As declared in a special 1935 issue of *Architectural Record* detailing government investment in housing, “The new capital—for whatever purposes borrowed, refinancing or new construction, by a municipality, a limited dividend corporation, an operative builder, or an individual homeowner—will be secured by the same type of mortgage.”\(^{22}\) The adoption of standardized lending protocols, appraisal guidelines, and homebuilding subsidies authorized by the National Housing Act of 1934 simultaneously codified within federal policy the racially discriminatory practices that had previously been confined to local housing markets.\(^{23}\) Under the heading “Protection from Adverse Influences,” the FHA's 1936 *Underwriting Manual* identified Black residents as deleterious to property values and prohibited banks from financing projects that would enable “infiltration [by] inharmonious racial groups.”\(^{24}\) From the viewpoint of


\(^{22}\) “Housing as a New Influence in Architecture,” *Architectural Record* 77, no. 3 (March 1935): 147.


lenders, Black Americans were determined to be unqualified and unworthy borrowers, an economic deficiency—first violently imposed, then attributed to racial backwardness—that further necessitated the reformatory and assimilative function of federally-administered housing. Philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva cites this contrived deficit as itself a form of “unpayable debt” or “negative accumulation” inherited by the descendants of enslaved people. She explains, “The image of the other that racial knowledge manufactures is an effect of a double violence, namely the juridical total violence that ensures colonial expropriation and the scientific productive violence of the tools of modern knowledge that transubstantiate colonial expropriation into a natural, that is, racial, deficit.” Restrained on either side by this discursive double bind, struggles for Black participation in the new mortgage-based economy were often forced to concede to developmentalist narratives of “racial improvement” centered upon the remedial powers of domesticity.

Situated at the intersection of Black studies, media studies, and architectural history, this thesis examines New Deal housing in the Southern and Mid-Atlantic regions of the United States as a spatial apparatus that was charged with organizing an economy of racial difference. The investigation considers a formative moment in the early twentieth-century: before the market for residential construction consolidated around the federally-subsidized, single-family home; before the lily-white suburb sprouted at regular intervals across the continent; before racialized divisions between homeownership and tenancy “transformed public housing into a visual sign for the permanent unfitness of

working-class Blacks as a group”; before the eugenics-adjacent discourse of slum containment gave way to postwar “urban renewal”; and before discriminatory lenders—the American banking industry en masse—honed and popularized the race-based practice of “predatory inclusion.”27 While the centrality of the home in a rapidly restructuring American economy had begun to come into focus, the particular form that it would eventually assume remained unclear. Moreover, the territorial divisions ordering differentiated geographies of underdevelopment and impoverishment were in flux. Propelling these dramatic transformations was the protracted economic crisis enveloping the nation, under which previously improbable proposals for the provision of a social wage abounded. In turn, federally-funded housing construction acquired a primary place within the “colonial and racial matrix of capitalist accumulation.”28

The range of experimental developments commissioned by the federal government were nevertheless oriented by a divergent array of competing and asymmetrical forces. Consequently, the narratives contained herein are not of the operations of one locus of power but of many distributed loci that exerted influences in concert. In short, this is a story about racial capitalism and the myriad social reformers who imbued state-sponsored housing development with their hopes for repair. Simultaneously, this is a story about housing as a mechanism of racialization—specifically, how federal housing construction married a Lockean ideology

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of improvement centered around the mixing of labor and land with ideas of environmental determinism derived from nineteenth-century race science.\textsuperscript{29} Additionally, it is a story of how the property regimes resulting from slavery in tandem with a secular crisis of accumulation produced a racialized “labor reserve” that the Keynesian state then attempted to administer via the home.\textsuperscript{30} Critically, this is also a story about the distributed networks within which the Black entrepreneurialism of figures like architect Hilyard R. Robinson and economist Robert C. Weaver variously clashed and congealed with the Black radicalism of historian W. E. B. Du Bois and the white socialism of the Regional Planning Association of America. Furthermore, it is a story of how the discourses and techniques of economic cooperation that circulated fluidly between radical, reformist, and reactionary factions ultimately shaped the design of model New Deal communities.

The model housing developments of the New Deal might be understood as rehearsal spaces for a renewed engine of American racial capitalism—one in which the state and industry became ever more deeply intertwined. These experiments occurred in fits and starts. Some would prove to be progenitors while others merely delineated the outermost boundaries of an evolving racial Keynesian state. I argue that the home, in its many valences, was successively mobilized as an instrument for the spatial inscription of race and property, yoking whiteness to possession through a series of heuristic trials in state-capitalist housing development. Simultaneously, the demonstration projects produced domains of contestation that gestured toward incipient Black sovereignties and non-state forms of social organization. Obscuring the fundamental violence of this technocratic endeavor was the sheer banality of its orchestration—a deluge of


\textsuperscript{30} Robinson, \textit{Black Marxism}, 204.
administrative actions by which housing was iteratively enlisted in allocating what Du Bois termed the “dividends of whiteness.”

**Crisis and Surplus**

Critical for grounding an investigation of federal housing development in the Depression-era United States is an analysis of the reconfiguration of capital and state initiated by the New Deal. Still, to periodize the dawn of Keynesianism as the origin of state intervention in the liberal market economy would be to obscure the historical preconditions that enabled this momentous shift in policy. Rather than two distinct entities, capital and state power were foundationally interdependent, bound through the “legal coding” by which assets acquired juridical recognition as exchangeable property. As explained by legal scholar Katharina Pistor, this invisible process produced the enclosures necessary for ongoing cycles of primitive accumulation throughout the American continent and provided a basis for all subsequent market activity and state mediation. Secured by the state’s provisional monopoly on violence, property, as an elementary building block of capitalist exchange, also served to mediate between the nation-state and its citizenry. These juridical and economic relationships that were sedimented over the *longue durée* of American settler colonialism and capitalist expansion formed the governmental terrain upon which the New Deal was enacted.

Writing in 1944, economist Karl Polanyi would similarly demystify the historical relationship between the liberal market economy and government intervention:

> There was nothing natural about laissez-faire; free markets could never have come into being merely by allowing things to take their course. Just as cotton

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manufacturers—the leading free trade industry—were created by the help of protective tariffs, export bounties, and indirect wage subsidies, laissez-faire itself was enforced by the state.\footnote{Karl Polanyi, \textit{The Great Transformation} (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1944), 145.}

Associated with the influential theories of economist John Maynard Keynes, the 1930s and 1940s nonetheless witnessed “an enormous increase in the administrative functions of the state,” with the creation of “centralized bureaucracies able to fulfill the tasks set by the adherents of liberalism.”\footnote{John Maynard Keynes, \textit{General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money} (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1936); Polanyi, \textit{The Great Transformation}, 145.} In spite of this transformation, the concerted build-up of administrative capacity preempted by a sputtering national economy and subsequently authorized by the New Deal was portrayed as “merely unleashing existing, but latent, market forces.”\footnote{David M. P. Freund, “Marketing the Free Market: State Intervention and the Politics of Prosperity in Metropolitan America,” in \textit{The New Suburban History}, eds. Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 13.} Consequently, the outsize role of federal intervention in restructuring markets was diminished even as it was being engineered and promoted to the American public.

Moreover, while the New Deal, beginning in 1933 and formally concluding in 1939, has often been characterized as a series of socially progressive state interventions—first marked by a developmental state, then by a fiscalist state—economists also point to the program as a continuation of a longer trajectory of state management of the money supply and credit market subsidies.\footnote{Freund, “Marketing the Free Market: State Intervention and the Politics of Prosperity in Metropolitan America.”} Even before the financial crisis of 1929, the wide-ranging consumer gains promised by Fordized manufacturing remained largely unrealized due to the persistence of low wages throughout sectors of the American economy and limited access to lines of credit.
Accordingly, state investment in residential construction—directly through public housing and indirectly through subsidized mortgages—stimulated “new supply, new demand, and new wealth,” with Federal Housing Administrator James A. Moffett boasting shortly after the agency’s formation in 1934 that it was “creating a year-round market” for home improvement and consumer durables. Long-term, low-interest mortgages facilitated new levels of consumption for the millions of white Americans, comprising 98 percent of borrowers, who could suddenly augment their spending through easy access to household debt. As a result, the American home would come to function as a primary implement for administering the emergent national economy—a term fittingly derived from the Greek oikos for “household.”

Spurred by a historic crisis of overaccumulation, the federal government’s entrance into the arena of housing finance and construction marked a dramatic departure from its role in the preceding decades. Architectural historian Jonathan Massey identifies the twentieth-century antecedents of the New Deal interventionist state in first the “laissez faire state” and then the “associational state.” This earlier arrangement was characterized by decentralized and uncertain credit typically offered by private lenders, a practice which severely restricted the regional availability of capital and necessitated large down payments often out of reach for prospective buyers. Following World War I, the Commerce Department began to promote coordination among private lenders, coinciding with the popularization of building and loan associations under the tenure of Herbert Hoover. (Black-owned mutual benefit enterprises like the People’s Building and

Loan Association in Hampton, Virginia had spearheaded this model of community finance as early as the 1880s.\textsuperscript{39} Simultaneously, industry initiatives, such as the Better Homes in America campaign, received the enthusiastic endorsement of federal officials for evangelizing the virtues of private property ownership. However, with the steep rise in foreclosures precipitated by the stock market collapse of 1929 and the withdrawal of banks from the mortgage market, conditions favorable to more immediate interventions in mortgage capital liquidity loomed. By June of 1934, Keynesian federal policy directly subsidized mortgages and housing construction through the passage of the National Housing Act and subsequent creation of the Federal Housing Administration. In tandem, the Public Works Administration broke ground on the earliest of 60 planned residential projects, one of which—the racially segregated Techwood Homes in Atlanta, Georgia—would become the first public housing development in the country.\textsuperscript{40}

While offering a reproducible mechanism for the distribution of economic risk, federally-administered housing development also shaped subjectivity, disciplining both homeowners and tenants through the self-regulating “liberal governmentality” of mortgage payments, credit scores, and rental applications.\textsuperscript{41} Prior studies have emphasized the utility of debt, on one hand, and a social wage, on the other, as curbs to political radicalism during this period, particularly among white industrial workers who were perceived to be coalescing around communism.\textsuperscript{42} This analysis considers housing through legal scholar Brenna Bhandar’s discussion of “racial regimes of ownership,”

\textsuperscript{42} Gilmore, “Fatal Couplings of Difference and Power.”
which captures the reciprocal relationship between property law and racial subjectivity. Accordingly, the orientation of the American home, to paraphrase her formulation, was toward the organization of national territory and the production of racialized subjects. Furthermore, the foundational work of legal scholar Cheryl I. Harris positions whiteness as a parallel construction of property through rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, and rights to exclude. Harris nevertheless, concedes the instability of racial formations whose boundaries were continually being rewritten in relation to a marked and dispossessed “other.” Finally, I look to the related Foucauldian concept of dispositif, described as a “heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic positions.” In the context of this investigation, dispositif may be understood as an assembly of elements connected by mutual relations, the taxis of order and orientation which together produce a disposition, and discursively linked articulations of space and power.

Moreover, the guiding concepts of crisis and its obverse, surplus, assume multiple overlapping meanings in this inquiry. Within a market economy, a system-wide failure to disaccumulate commodities produces conditions of crisis—an occurrence exemplified by the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the spread of economic malaise throughout American manufacturing and agricultural sectors. Following geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s formulation, the New Deal’s concerted build-up of state capacity can be regarded as a “spatial fix” or “territorial resolution” to the political and economic crisis triggered by

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overaccumulations of surplus land, surplus finance capital, surplus industrial capacity, and surplus labor.\textsuperscript{46} Predictably, Depression-era exclusion from the labor market was unevenly borne; Black workers throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Southern United States were frequently dismissed by employers who sought to replace them with jobless white workers.\textsuperscript{47} Race therefore functioned as a technique of dehumanization through which groups were made differently vulnerable to economic abandonment. Regionally-specific state interventions attempted to absorb and redirect some of these surpluses—albeit while exacerbating others—through infrastructural development, targeted subsidies, and employment programs. As Gilmore distills, “Keynesian institutions congealed legitimacy and revenues into highly differentiated, but reproducible, units of state power.”\textsuperscript{48} Each economic surfeit converged in state-sponsored housing construction, where fallowed land, stagnant private lending, an abundance of industrial materials, and idled workers were variously recombined under the supervision of newly created state agencies charged with ballooning federal spending.

Additionally, surplus can also be identified in the place-based or fugitive practices that eluded the administrative logics advanced by the New Deal alphabet agencies. As anthropologist James C. Scott observes in relation to the emergence of methods of high modernist governance,

\begin{quote}
Local practices . . . exhibited a diversity and intricacy that reflected a great variety of purely local, not state, interests. That is to say, they could not be assimilated into an administrative grid without being either transformed or reduced to a convenient, if partly fictional, shorthand. . . . Backed by state power through records, courts, and ultimately coercion, these state fictions transformed the
\end{quote}

reality they presumed to observe, although never so thoroughly as to precisely fit the grid.  

Regional Black traditions of refusal, collectivity, and mutual aid—forms of practical knowledge that Scott terms *mētis*—arguably exceeded the myopic vision of New Deal technocrats intent upon imposing the abstract scientific knowledge of social engineering via housing construction.  

Reports of work stoppages, community self-defense, and alleged jobsite thefts, among other examples of insubordination, suggest that these communities acquiesced to “paternalism only to the degree that it advanced and protected their own interests and values.”  

Similarly, participation in the New Deal demonstration projects by Black professionals did not necessarily preclude more surreptitious expressions of dissent, a dynamic which served to destabilize any neat binary between compliant and conflictual acts as they appear within the historical record. The theoretical contributions of Martinican political philosopher Frantz Fanon further beg the unanswerable question: In what instances might federal archives merely index white masks?  

**Lines of Flight**

Writing in the pages of the National Urban League’s publication, *Opportunity*, in 1935, Horace Mann Bond was unhesitant to draw a straight line between the operations of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in the American South and the unfulfilled promise of reparations. Referencing Union Army general William Tecumseh Sherman’s famous field orders, Bond observed, “In a cotton country, a subsistence homestead is just

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another word for forty acres and a mule.” 53 Whether this decidedly nineteenth-century conception of recompense—as officials would promote the program, “a homestead and hope”—had retained its value through twentieth-century economic transformations was the subject of much debate in contemporaneous Black journals and newspapers. 54 Bond notes, “The mechanization of agriculture and our increasing industrialization make the ‘subsistence homestead’ of today, in our current vision of the old cry of the Freedmen, a thing not so simple of application as it sounds.” 55 Other commentators rejected the narrative of “back-to-the-farm” pastoralism, asserting that the objective was not to compete with commercial farms, but rather to facilitate an exit from sharecropping by supplementing “part-time gardening with part-time industrial labor.” 56 Uncontested, however, was an understanding that Black Americans’ precarious position within the exploitative agricultural sector during the Great Depression was a direct inheritance of slavery and property regimes resulting from the plantation system. Moreover, this vexed relationship between possession and the political-symbolic position of Blackness gestured toward the genesis of the American nation-state. 57 To echo the late historian Patrick Wolfe, enslaved Black labor combined with expropriated indigenous land had produced white property. 58

The burdened transition from human chattel to self-possessed, rights-bearing subjects marked the formerly enslaved as belated entrants to a field of accumulated

55 Bond, “Forty Acres and a Mule,” 151.
57 Da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race.
property relations.\textsuperscript{59} Entrenched, violently-maintained patterns of Southern land tenure persisted after 1865, with the preponderance of freedmen and freedwomen who remained in the region subjected to coercive sharecropping agreements under the rule of white landowners. Within this quasi-feudal agrarian economy, tenants rented acres of farmland in exchange for a portion of crop yields typically amounting to fifty percent, fueling a cycle of inescapable debt.\textsuperscript{60} As chronicled by W. E. B. Du Bois, Reconstruction-era attempts at land reform were continually thwarted, with the reactionary “counter-revolution of property” culminating in the institutionalization of Black Codes and Jim Crow.\textsuperscript{61} Episodes such as the predatory liquidation of the short-lived Freedmen’s Savings and Trust Company in 1874, created by an act of Congress at the conclusion of the Civil War, further dispossessed Black depositors of the earnings they had amassed in their first decade outside of bondage. With the forging of the Compromise of 1877, a covert election agreement between Northern Republicans and Southern Democrats that brought an end to Reconstruction, the loss of regional protections for Black political rights, which had ostensibly been codified in the Fourteenth Amendment, was all but complete.\textsuperscript{62} In South Carolina, for example, Black voter turnout declined from 96 percent in 1876 to 11 percent in 1896.\textsuperscript{63}


\textsuperscript{62} Da Silva, \textit{Toward a Global Idea of Race}.

Nevertheless, historian Manning Marable observes, “The development of a strong Black land-base became an ideological imperative of Black thought by the 1890s.”

Prominent advocates of this position, such as Tuskegee Institute leader Booker T. Washington, regarded Black agricultural development as the primary vehicle for “salvation as a race.” Enterprises like the Southern Improvement Company, a joint venture between the Tuskegee Institute and the Hampton Institute, attempted scalable models for land acquisition and redistribution in the Black Belt region of Alabama. Bolstered by an emerging network of Black banks, agricultural colleges, and petit bourgeois merchants, Black ownership of farmland peaked in 1910 with 890,000 farms comprising approximately 15 million acres. In the following decades, however, numerous coinciding factors would erode these hard-won gains. Economic pressure to engage in monocultural cotton production drove accelerated soil depletion and erosion, resulting in the devaluation of agricultural land. Moreover, the wartime collapse of international cotton markets, the subsequent shuttering of Black-owned financial institutions throughout the South, and a coordinated upsurge in lynchings and white acts of terror converged, initiating a long decline in Black agriculture and land tenure.

The virtual monopoly on Southern agricultural production held by “an elite group of white planters, bankers, investors, and merchants” was further consolidated by the economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s. Responding to the overproduction of staple crops during the early years of the Great Depression, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, under the leadership of Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace,

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distributed relief payments to a white landowner class in exchange for agreements to halt planting and cultivation. Absent enforceable protections for the mass of Black workers who comprised their labor force, the policy was anticipated to produce wholly predictable effects; meek provisions for sharecropper relief, where existent, were easily siphoned by planters. 68 Journalist E. E. Lewis lamented, “A concession to the share-cropper class is not only one to labor but one to the Negro as well. And such a concession is thereby made more distasteful, and less necessary.” 69 Refuting the need for aid to sharecroppers, Renwick C. Kennedy of The New Republic remarked bluntly, “It would be better . . . for some Negroes to starve than to upset [landowners] with this high wage.” 70 The result for Black tenant farmers throughout the South and Mid-Atlantic was disastrous, often precipitating in their subsequent eviction and incomplete integration into the circuit of wage labor. 71 Sharecroppers, who had long acted as “economic shock-absorbers” for white landowners, suddenly found themselves rendered superfluous. 72

These migrants joined the ranks of over a million who had fled the South since the onset of the Great Migration in 1910. Black studies scholar Saidiya Hartman astutely characterizes this coordinated movement as a second “general strike against slavery in its new guises.” 73 Not to escape cruel irony, however, Black refugees were confronted with an expanding array of legal and extralegal mechanisms designed to nationalize the spatial logics of Southern segregation. In 1926, the United States Supreme Court upheld the

72 Baldwin, Poverty and Politics, 25.
legality of racially exclusive covenants in *Corrigan v. Buckley.* Zoning and land use controls, framed in the race-neutral language of commonsense economic protections, were also advanced by the National Association of Real Estate Boards as a means of relegateing Black residents to undesirable areas. Their efforts aligned with progressive reform advocates who leveraged voguish ideas of environmental determinism to equate clean cities with moral order. As Hartman notes, “Improving the slum and targeting urban vice extended the color line in absence of a legal apparatus or statutory law to mandate or enforce it. Progressive reformers and settlement workers were the architects and planners of racial segregation in Northern cities.” The parallel influences of real estate interests and the progressive reform agenda met their apex in the passage of the Federal Housing Act of 1934, which formalized assessments of race-based financial risk as prevailing criteria for the determination of mortgage eligibility. The resulting actuarial maps adopted by federally-insured private lenders would restrict the urban and suburban distribution of Black residency throughout the United States for decades to come, functionally giving new geographic dimensions to Jim Crow.

A contingent of Black political appointees in advisory roles worked to alter federal policy from within the capital, even as the Roosevelt administration authored housing finance legislation that ensured the consolidation of racial regimes of ownership. Writing in 1938, economist Robert C. Weaver reflected,

> Covenants, agreements, and restrictions prevent the normal expansion of the area open to Negro occupancy. . . . If Negroes attempt to go into undeveloped areas, usually there are two difficulties facing them. First, in the South, there are no schools available and little chance of getting adequate facilities for Negro children.

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76 Gotham, “Racialization and the State.”
constructed. . . Second, there is a lack of public facilities. In new Negro developments, there are seldom paved streets, adequate street lights, or decent transportation facilities. 77

During his time in the Department of Interior and the Public Works Administration, Weaver systematically cataloged barriers to Black mobility and sought to ameliorate these obstacles through advocacy for public housing construction. This was nonetheless accomplished at the cost of conceding homeownership to rentership and reifying a racialized, two-tier housing market. In defense of his pragmatic position, Weaver further mused, “The fact that our society so long has attempted to extend [homeownership] to all classes, although it is based upon earnings much above the median for this nation, is proof of its unreality. Although it might be desirable to have a nation or a community made up entirely of homeowners, it is impossible under the existing economic structure of America.” 78 His petition to open federal construction contracts to Black architects changed the course of New Deal housing development, clearing the way for large-scale apartment blocks like the Harlem River Houses in New York City, designed by John Louis Wilson, Jr., and the Langston Terrace Dwellings in Washington, D.C., designed by Hilyard R. Robinson and Paul Revere Williams.

A Depression-era resurgence in cooperative organization was another means of negotiating the vicissitudes of an indifferent Keynesian state and a venomous Jim Crow society. Writing in a 1935 essay, Du Bois took stock of the mounting economic fallout and its asymmetrical toll. “Since 1929 Negro workers, like white workers, have lost their jobs, have had mortgages foreclosed on their farms and homes, have used up their small savings. But, in the case of the Negro worker, everything has been worse in larger or

smaller degree; the loss has been greater and more permanent.”79 He further decried the inadequate Washingtonian vision of enterprising self-help, observing that “technology advanced more rapidly than Hampton or Tuskegee could adjust their curricula.” Du Bois, who began advocating for consumer cooperatives as early as 1907 with the publication of Economic Co-operation Among Negro Americans, regarded cooperative activities as “peculiar instances of the 'advantage of the disadvantage'—of the way in which a hostile environment has forced the Negro to do for himself.”80 This moment, however, marked a fundamental change in strategy. Faced with what he diagnosed as the intractable anti-Blackness of white labor, Du Bois argued for segregated cooperative communities, or the creation of a “Black cooperative movement separate from white society.”81 Together, these competing tendencies toward accommodation, assimilation, and separation found varying expression across a regional assemblage of unfolding demonstration projects.

**Housing and Uneven Development**

In the context of this inquiry, the model developments commissioned by New Deal alphabet agencies present useful limit cases for examining the shifting contours of race and property as they were continually rearticulated through the apparatus of the home. These projects were defined by their apparent contradictions, alternately regarded as radical and regressive; as dangerous communist ploys and ineffectual diversions for “utopian dreamers”; as endeavors that employed Black architects, engineers, and artisan builders yet which invited and readily capitulated to white protest; as opportunities for

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expanded Black homeownership that treacherously extended the domain of Jim Crow; as cooperative initiatives that denied existing communalist traditions emerging from the Black Atlantic; and as experiments that contested the persistence of the plantation economy while giving it new and novel spatial forms.  

Many of these agencies experimented with European models for social housing design during a period in which, as architectural historian Charles L. Davis II asserts, “public housing was [still] white.” Such instances afford critical insight into the contortions that property underwent as whiteness came to be coextensive with entitlement to a Keynesian social wage. Unlike some of their counterparts in Washington, D.C., however, other agencies were less beholden to the appearance of profitability, often touting their function in the provision of economic relief without recourse to the fastidious bookkeeping of the private sector.

Numerous figures recur in the experiments documented in ensuing chapters: Hilyard R. Robinson, chair of the department of architecture at Howard University and architect of both Aberdeen Gardens in Hampton, Virginia and the Langston Terrace Dwellings in Washington, D.C.; Robert C. Weaver, a Harvard-educated economist who served as Advisor on Negro Affairs in the Department of Interior and as Consultant to the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration; Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, architects and planners whose influential organization, the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), integrally shaped federal models for suburban residential construction; Rexford G. Tugwell, a professor of economics at Columbia University, Under Secretary of Agriculture, and Director of the Resettlement Administration; Will W.

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Alexander, chief of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, co-author of *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, and Farm Security Administrator; Joseph H. B. Evans, executive assistant in the Division of Subsistence Homesteads and later “Race Relations Specialist” in the Resettlement Administration; and W. E. B. Du Bois, Harvard-trained historian, founding editor of *The Crisis*, and public intellectual who sometimes offered counsel to New Deal administrators and at other times acted as their most incisive critic. Nevertheless, the intention of this inquiry is not to retell history as merely the plaything of powerful men, but rather to locate their positions within disciplinary, institutional, and discursive networks through which state and market forces ultimately converged to initiate racialized, Keynesian trials in housing production.

Within the dizzying litany of New Deal alphabet agencies tasked with managing the nation’s economic surpluses, Black land-grant universities also played an important regional role. The Hampton Institute, founded by colonial missionary and Union Army general Samuel Chapman Armstrong in 1868, sought to promote the “gospel of work” among the formerly enslaved and Indigenous youth in the Virginia Peninsula through agricultural and industrial training.  

An early alumnus of the school’s vocational curriculum was Booker T. Washington, who was shortly thereafter appointed as the inaugural leader of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama in 1881. Critics alleged that their curriculum of “racial uplift” efficiently produced subservient wage earners while naturalizing Black inferiority and Jim Crow segregation.  

Moreover, by the early twentieth-century, the political instrumentality of the “Tuskegee Machine”

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had been firmly established, conferring Washington and his successors with symbolic authority over a range of affairs involving Black communities. As Du Bois reflected in 1940,

> After a time almost no Negro institution could collect funds without the recommendation or acquiescence of Mr. Washington. . . . Moreover, it must not be forgotten that this Tuskegee Machine was not solely the idea and activity of Black folk at Tuskegee. It was largely encouraged and given financial aid through certain white groups and individuals in the North.87

Along with Howard University, which introduced a professional architecture curriculum in 1919, these three institutions—with their varying emphases on Black agricultural development, land acquisition, and building and industrial trades—exerted measurable influences on the New Deal demonstration projects and their public reception throughout the Southern United States.88

Finally, this account resists the temptation to stage the New Deal as a vulgar moral drama between liberal and conservative factions of government, instead considering the opportunistic “oscillation between reformist and repressive ‘fixes’” as intrinsic to the centuries-long project of American nation-building and the endurance of its attendant racial regimes of ownership.89 Such a perspective is commensurate with a non-monolithic view of the state, encouraging repeated shifts in analytical scale from the minutiae of highly differentiated bureaucracies to the geographic interplay of state policies in their aggregate. Under the aegis of a burgeoning interventionist state, the expanded administrative capacity to variously recombine, reconfigure, and reproduce relations of power proved to be perhaps the era’s most abiding legacy. Furthermore, while

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the scope of this investigation does not extend to the post-war redirection of state subsidies toward a nascent military-industrial complex, federal housing construction does register the transition from the contentious peacetime provision of an unprecedented social wage via the home to virtually unchecked wartime defense spending. This is particularly evident in the 1941 construction of a military barracks addendum in Greenbelt, Maryland, which unsurprisingly dodged the rightwing backlash that Democratic Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd and *Washington Post* journalist Felix Bruner had stirred toward the prototype rental community beginning in 1936.90

Chapter one, “‘Self-Help Rochdale Style’: Administering Cooperative Communities in Rural Alabama,” considers the role of state-initiated cooperative communities in negotiating land dispossession, racial segregation, and economic abandonment in the Black Belt region of Alabama. Cooperatives functioned as infrastructure through which Black Southerners contested racial regimes of ownership and resisted what Saidiya Hartman terms the “afterlife of slavery,” marked by “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, . . . and impoverishment.”91 The chapter begins with a discussion of the regional Black tradition of cooperation, collectivism, and mutual aid that was contemporaneously denied by state administrators and retrospectively obscured in historiography. It then chronicles three successive federal resettlement projects: the Tuskegee Land Use Demonstration Project and Prairie Farms, both in Macon County, and Gee’s Bend in Wilcox County. These

projects revealed frictions between the newly-formed alphabet agencies and preexisting, Black-led efforts toward post-Reconstruction land reform.

Chapter two, “The Plot and the Black Garden City in Industrial Virginia,” documents the planning and construction of Aberdeen Gardens, contemplating the plantation plot system underlying the development and the legacy of domestic pedagogy at the neighboring Hampton Institute. Perilously positioned between the white paternalist sponsorship of the conservative Hampton Institute and a federal bureaucracy varying engaged with the plight of impoverished Black families, the experimental community nonetheless became a site of expanded Black land ownership during a period of protracted economic crisis and de jure racial segregation. Tracing the dual influences of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, the chapter further positions Aberdeen Gardens between competing, and often overlapping, tendencies within a Black American political milieu of the 1930s—notably, a Black entrepreneurial wager on proprietary conceptions of economic advancement and a Black radical desire to build forms of collective life unbounded by the strictures of American racial capitalism.

Chapter three, “Enclosing a White ‘Utopia’ in Suburban Maryland,” catalogs the spatial mechanisms of segregation within the high modernist suburb of Greenbelt, Maryland, the simultaneous construction of the Langston Terrace Dwellings in Washington, D.C., and the emergent racial binarism in which the “rival” projects were enmeshed. Boundaries, both physical and discursive, were central to the all-white community of Greenbelt, producing a series of racialized enclosures wherein “an exclusive, partial commonwealth” could be cultivated. Structured by an interior-exterior

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dichotomy, the garden city afforded a space of bucolic separation in which residents would functionally trade upon their unmarked status as “a source of material, psychological, affective, and libidinal” gratification. Simultaneously, the salutary benefits of nature encoded racial metaphors of cleanliness, purity, and order that served to rhetorically structure the garden city, a feature that proved well-suited to the apartheid conditions of the interwar United States.

Finally, an epilogue considers the political content of the New Deal’s archival forms and the epistemic violence enacted through its absences. Taking cues from scholars who have devised approaches for negotiating archival silences, this concluding discussion reflects upon the investigation’s improvised methods—namely, the practice of reading across federal records, personal correspondence, and contemporaneous journals and newspapers in order to destabilize prevailing state narratives of modernization and progress.

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94 Myers, The Gratification of Whiteness, 79.
Fig. 0.1. “Housing as a New Influence in Architecture,” *The Architectural Record* 77, no. 3 (March 1935): 147.
Fig. 0.2. John P. Davis, “A Black Inventory of the New Deal,” *The Crisis* 42 (May 1935): 141–2.
Fig. 0.3. Secretary of Interior Harold L. Ickes with architectural model, Washington, D.C., 1936. Harris and Ewing Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 0.4. Federal Housing Administration Clip Sheet, Washington, D.C., 1936. Harris and Ewing Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 0.5. Sharecropper, Montgomery County, Alabama, 1937. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 0.6. Advisor on Negro Affairs and Housing Division Consultant Robert C. Weaver, Washington, D.C., 1942. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
CHAPTER ONE

“Self-Help Rochdale Style”: Administering Cooperative Communities in Rural Alabama

They recommended the establishment of cooperative workshops, building and loan associations, [and] the purchase of land “as a remedy against their exclusion from other workshops on account of color, as a means of furnishing employment, as well as a protection against the aggression of capital, and as the easiest and shortest method of enabling every man to procure a homestead for his family.” —W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction

When New Deal administrators arrived in Wilcox County, Alabama at the site of Gee’s Bend cotton plantation in 1936, their entrance marked the first federal foray into the geographically isolated community since at least the cessation of the Freedmen’s Bureau more than six decades prior. Situated along a wide turn in the Alabama River, the agrarian settlement was effectively severed from the nearest town of Camden located just nine miles to the south, “approachable only by gullied roads from one direction and a precarious make-shift ferry from the other.” Coordinator of Cooperative Associations T. C. Miller would write of the residents in 1938,

These Negroes constitute a rather unique group. They are all descendants of the slaves who lived on and worked the big plantation from which the [community] had been developed. They worked as ordinary sharecroppers on this plantation until 1931, getting their supplies from a furnishing merchant in Camden. In that year, the merchant died; and the administrators of his estate liquidated his accounts in full with the Gee's Bend Negroes, taking their entire crops and all their livestock and farming equipment. The Red Cross kept the people alive until the Rural Rehabilitation program got under way, when all of the families obtained loans from that source. They have made an unusually good record in repaying these loans, paying out completely in 1936; and they now appear to be ready to take the next step in the process of becoming independent farm owners.2

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2 Cooperative Activities on Gee’s Bend Project, RR-AL-31, March 15, 1938, Records of Cooperative Associations, 1935–1959, Textual Records Division, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
Under the jurisdiction of the Resettlement Administration, federal officials purchased two tracts of the plantation land totaling 10,188 acres for $121,920 and, in 1939, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) formalized a five-year lease to the former sharecroppers at an annual rate of $48 each with an option to buy. The project, internally titled RR-AL-31, sought to provide 100 families with 80-acre farms in addition to individual loans “for the construction of houses, barns, and other necessary buildings.” In tandem, administrators facilitated the formation of four cooperatives to encourage ideals of thrift and self-sufficiency.

Fascination with the semi-autonomous community soon seeped into national media coverage. Alternately characterizing the residual antebellum settlement as “crude,” “backward,” “tribal,” and “picturesque,” John Temple Graves II of the The New York Times peppered a 1937 feature with racial tropes suggestive of a developmentally-stunted, maroon society. He reported, “So self-contained are these Negroes . . . that they might have gone on happily lost to civilization if the depression had not come. If cotton hadn't dropped to five cents a pound they might have gone on being what the world calls primitive . . . surviving the annual freshets, growing their cotton and corn on good land for a good return.” Indifferent to the rhythms of Gee’s Bend, however, the engines of modernization had continued apace, fueled in part by a heretofore unprecedented state program of Keynesian intervention. The New Deal first roiled Southern agricultural markets, leaving the families at Gee’s Bend destitute and forced to scavenge for food. It then brought “machines and implements to be purchased and used under what the Government calls a ‘cooperative plan’—a cotton gin, a peanut picker, a

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3 Cooperative Activities on Gee’s Bend Project, NARA.
4 Graves, “The Big World at Last Reaches Gee’s Bend.”
5 Graves, “The Big World at Last Reaches Gee’s Bend.”
hay baler, a grist mill, a cane mill, a canning plant, tractors and terracing machines.”

Graves lamented the fateful influences of encroaching urbanism and industry on “the Negro’s destiny,” paternalistically cautioning that “racial virtues . . . tend to disappear in more civilized quarters where the ambition of the Negro is to become only a carbon copy of the white man.”

The belated arrival of the federal government was preceded by a decadeslong erosion of Black land tenure in the American South. As historians Robert E. Zabawa and Sarah T. Warren astutely observe, “The story of the African American in United States agriculture is largely one of the struggle to obtain and retain land, and frequently this struggle has been unsuccessful.” The four million freedmen and freedwomen who emerged from bondage penniless at the conclusion of the Civil War endeavored tirelessly to secure soil upon which to sow seeds and build their homes. Black studies scholar Saidiya Hartman notes the cruel irony posed by the “double freedom” that greeted newly emancipated slaves, wherein a nominal “free[dom] to exchange one’s labor” was granted alongside “free[dom] from material resources.” Opposed at every turn by the orchestration of venomous Black Codes and Jim Crow laws, Black Southerners nevertheless came to possess a sizable share of agricultural land by the early twentieth century. Bolstered by a nascent network of Black banks, agricultural colleges, and petit bourgeois merchants, Black ownership of farmland peaked in 1910 with 890,000 farms

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6 Graves, “The Big World at Last Reaches Gee’s Bend.”
7 Graves, “The Big World at Last Reaches Gee’s Bend.”
comprising approximately 15 million acres. In the following decades, however, numerous coinciding factors would erode these hard-won gains. Economic pressure to engage in monocultural cotton production drove accelerated soil depletion, resulting in the devaluation of agricultural land. Moreover, the wartime collapse of international cotton markets, the subsequent shuttering of Black-owned financial institutions throughout the South, and a coordinated upsurge in lynchings and white acts of terror converged, initiating a concerted decline in Black agriculture and land tenure. By the time of the ruinous stock market crash of 1929, the majority of Black Americans still resided in the South and two-thirds of this population worked as agricultural laborers, with most in exploitative cotton tenancy. Approximately four-fifths owned not a square foot of the land that they tilled.

Perhaps predictably, it was upon the backs of Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers that the ledgers of Southern agricultural modernization were balanced. As a multivalent instrument of American racial capitalism, the Keynesian state took with one hand and offered “alms” with the other. Historian and activist W. E. B. Du Bois forewarned in 1935,

Federal and State relief holds out little promise for the Negro. . . . In the attempt to rebuild agriculture the Southern landholder will in all probability be put on his feet, but the Black tenant has been pushed to the edge of despair. In the matter of housing, no comprehensive scheme for Negro homes has been thought out and only two or three local projects planned.

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Du Bois’ assessment proved prescient, even if his tune would vary slightly over the ensuing years. Beginning in 1933, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) systematically restructured Southern agricultural production to the benefit of white planters and drove waves of farmworker migration to the industrialized North. Unlike landowners, the vast majority of whom were white, Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers were neither represented on the AAA program committees nor were they included in benefit payments. First made to bear the burden of plummeting cotton prices, they were then evicted en masse when acreage reduction programs rendered their labor extraneous. Furthermore, when urban industry failed to absorb the influx of semi-proletarianized workers, the impoverished refugees had little choice but to return landless and bereft of wages.14

Following in the wake of the AAA in 1937, the rival FSA then granted comparatively meager concessions to this precarious group of racialized laborers through the agency’s rural rehabilitation programs. Communities such as Gee’s Bend fared better than many; the bulk of displaced Black farmworkers fell outside of the FSA’s resettlement and loan initiatives and were consequently left to fend for themselves. The devastating loss of employment and, by extension, claims to the land that they had labored upon—in some communities dating back to enslavement—was many orders of magnitude larger than the scale of federal redress. Between 1930 and 1940, approximately 200,000 Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers were uprooted as a result of state subsidies for the fallowing of agricultural land.15 By contrast,

federally-administered resettlement communities for Black residents, of which the FSA constructed nine in six Southern states, furnished an approximate total of 885 units. FSA officials, internally considered to be among the more politically “subversive” figures within the ballooning federal bureaucracy, assumed the role of edifying Black farmworkers on the virtues of cooperative organization. In Gee’s Bend, this included the appointment of a white community manager to assist in cooperative instruction, a practice that was standardized across all other FSA developments. That Black Southerners had for decades, if not centuries, honed practices of cooperation and mutual aid as means of collective survival was ironically eclipsed by federal administrators eager to advance their own institutional model of community development. Simultaneously, the conferral of modest relief served to obscure the primacy of the state itself in engineering racialized disposssession and expanding the domain of legalized segregation.

The elision of a Black cooperative tradition is also observable in New Deal historiography. Some of the most comprehensive studies to date give scant attention to Black agrarian cooperatives in the American South during the Great Depression or, alternatively, characterize their operations as isolated and discontinuous from a regional history of Black collectivism. This lapse is possibly an artifact of gaps within otherwise extensive federal records, which in turn indexed the unequal allocation of administrative resources toward Black communities. History thus risks reproducing the epistemic violence of the state and its corroborating archives. Scholars since the 1970s have

18 Donald Holley, “The Negro in the New Deal Resettlement Program.”
19 Conkin, Tomorrow a New World; Baldwin, Poverty and Politics.
revisited these experiments, however traces of this lacuna persist.20 For example, historian Donald Holley asserts that “Negro Americans had little history of communitarianism,” while acknowledging that “they had been the subject of many resettlement and colonization schemes.”21 More recently, economic historian Jessica Gordon-Nembhard sought to correct broader historical omissions through the supplementary use of Black newspaper and journal articles. Likewise, Black studies scholar Irwin J. Hunt has contextualized a Depression-era resurgence in cooperative organization as part of a sustained, if chronically unsuccessful, “project of unraveling Blackness from property.”22 The lingering question of why “African American . . . histories do not include cooperative practices or address cooperative strategy” nevertheless remains insufficiently addressed.23

Taking the resettlement communities of the FSA as case studies, this chapter considers the role of Black agrarian cooperatives in negotiating land dispossession, racial segregation, and economic abandonment in the American South during the 1930s and 1940s. Within the colonial and racial matrix of capitalist accumulation, cooperatives functioned as infrastructure through which Black Southerners contested racial regimes of ownership and weathered the vicissitudes of structural poverty.24 Ambiguously positioned between the Washingtonian mantra of self-help and the Du Boisian model of cooperation,

these state-initiated enterprises ultimately presented a paradox: they enabled spaces of opposition to the violence of economic immiseration yet proved readily assimilable into the prevailing logics of American racial capitalism—namely, by reproducing economies of racial difference and shifting the financial burden of the New Deal’s social welfare expenditures onto poor Black communities. Part one discusses the regional Black tradition of cooperative organization, collectivism, and mutual aid that was contemporaneously denied by state administrators and retrospectively obscured in historiography. Part two examines three federal resettlement projects in the Black Belt region of Alabama: the Tuskegee Land Use Demonstration Project and Prairie Farms, both in Macon County, and Gee’s Bend in Wilcox County. A conclusion reflects upon Du Bois’s unfulfilled vision for a Black cooperative network and the wartime withdrawal of funding from federal experiments in cooperative development.

A Cooperative Tradition

Economic historian Jessica Gordon-Nembhard defines a cooperative as an “autonomous association” formed voluntarily in order “to satisfy an economic or social need, to provide a quality good or service . . . at an affordable price, or to create an economic structure to . . . facilitate more equal distribution to compensate for a market failure.”

Cooperative enterprises, in which member-owners pooled resources to decrease individual costs, could be further classified into three categories: consumer-owned, producer-owned, and worker-owned. Examples of the former included credit unions, building and loan associations, cooperative housing, cooperative grocery stores, and utility cooperatives. Examples of the latter included agricultural, industrial, and craft cooperatives. Additionally, cooperative organizations were historically

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governed via direct democratic participation, which hinged upon core principles of open membership, equal voting rights, proportional returns based on investment, and continuous education. In turn, cooperative associations functioned as “polymorphous mechanisms for the democratic dissemination” of surplus-value among member-owners.26

As alternatives to models of commerce driven primarily by individual profit margins, cooperatives have undergone periodic surges in popularity but have never constituted more than a minority share of the American economy.27 A heterogeneous cooperative movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century United States was commonly attributed to the successive influences of Marxian socialism, social Darwinism, Peter Kropotkin’s theory of mutual aid, and John Dewey’s progressivism, among other secular and religious currents. Accordingly, cooperative principles were assimilated across an array of leftwing and rightwing political programs. Evidencing this ideological fungibility, physician and Cooperative League president James Peter Warbasse touted cooperative organization as a means of both promoting private property ownership and achieving biological superiority as a race, claiming in 1929 that “even the [white] race itself would progress under cooperation for only then could the science of eugenics be applied.”28 (Interestingly, the eugenicist leanings of Warbasse did not preclude a close personal relationship with Du Bois that extended to attending the meetings of the Negro Cooperative Guild and publishing his writing in the pages of The Crisis, circumstances that attest to the confounding ideological crosscurrents of the era.29)

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26 Hunt, Dreaming the Present, 28.
While prototypical organizations such as the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, formed near Manchester in 1844, and the Cooperative League of the United States of America, formed in New York City in 1916, would come to represent notable tendencies within a Euro-American cooperative lineage, distinct cooperative traditions rooted in the Black Atlantic were often overshadowed or disregarded both contemporaneously and historiographically.\(^{30}\) A 1940 essay by Spelman College professor and Cooperative League-affiliate John Hope II entitled “Negro Self-Help Rochdale Style” furthered this claim and urged European-style cooperative education as an antidote, imploring: “Is it not possible that an intensive educational program . . . among the Negroes might furnish the spearhead of a drive to accelerate the cooperative movement among one of the most economically needy groups in the nation?”\(^{31}\) Moreover, as historian Edward Magdol asserts, the racialized denial of Black agency and ingenuity, which was seeded during the Reconstruction era, “gave the lie . . . to prevailing . . . middle-class sentiments about [freedmen’s] alleged lack of readiness for a place in American society.”\(^{32}\) In actuality, cooperatives were instrumental in assisting Black populations to combat marginalization by state and market forces through their enactment of economic autonomy, commons as praxis, and prefigurative politics.\(^{33}\) This encompassed the creation of independent supply chains for the acquisition and production of goods; the sharing of resources, ideas, and labor; and the realization of


community self-governance in spite of state-sanctioned efforts to deny the full exercise of citizenship.

Attempting to remedy this oversight as early as 1907, Du Bois chronicled the endurance of Black practices of cooperation in the United States in his study entitled *Economic Co-operation Among Negro Americans*. The inquiry cataloged the development of regional forms of cooperative organization from pre-colonial African societies through their transformation during the Atlantic slave trade and proliferation in the wake of emancipation. Within this genealogy, Du Bois identified the origins of the Black church alongside the parallel emergence of secret beneficial and burial societies, episodes of cooperation "by means of insurrection,” and mutual aid networks for the assistance of fugitive slaves.34 Following the coordinated withdrawal of plantation labor and the toppling of chattel slavery by way of what Du Bois would later term the “general strike,” the newly emancipated further extended these social formations in freedmen’s towns, schools, cooperative farms, stores, banking institutions, and insurance associations.35 Over the ensuing decades, the success of such initiatives, which in some areas grew to outnumber white-owned businesses, frequently rendered them targets of racial backlash.

In the context of the Jim Crow South, the so-called “market failures” that Black cooperatives commonly sought to ameliorate encompassed debt peonage by way of exploitative farm tenancy, inadequate access to food and nutrition, insufficient housing and infrastructure, absence of healthcare, lack of credit availability, and, ultimately, legal

and extralegal manifestations of land dispossession.\textsuperscript{36} Racial discrimination also manifested as “exorbitant prices for an inferior quality” of goods as well as exclusion from recourse to the ballot box.\textsuperscript{37} In response, cooperatives pursued circumscribed forms of political and economic autonomy. Networks of regional cooperative associations regularly provided interlocking services to racially segregated Black communities, such as wholesale grocery purchasing, medical and dental care, savings and loan provision, processing and marketing of agricultural products, and lease or sale of housing and land. The designed interconnection of cooperative organizations, which relied intimately upon the financial wellbeing of individual member-owners, functioned to enhance their aggregate resilience.

Although an exhaustive account of the rich and varied post-Emancipation experiments in cooperative organization in the American South is not achievable here, select episodes serve as anecdotal illustrations. The short-lived Colored Farmers’ National Alliance and Cooperative Union was formed in Houston County, Texas in 1886 and boasted more than a million members before its dissolution in 1891.\textsuperscript{38} Historian Omar H. Ali positions the organization at the forefront of a Black populist movement that mobilized against the stranglehold on property maintained by white planters and merchants as well as the exploitative convict-leasing program through which unremunerated Black labor was coercively obtained.\textsuperscript{39} By placing recruitment advertisements in Black newspapers and tapping into preexisting regional networks—including Black churches, labor unions, and sharecropper coalitions—the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Zabawa and Warren, “From Company to Community.”
\item Gordon-Nembhard, \textit{Collective Courage}, 144.
\item Ray Marshall and Lamond Godwin, \textit{Cooperatives and Rural Poverty in the South} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971); Magdol, \textit{A Right to the Land}.
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association quickly extended its reach throughout the cotton-producing states of the South. The group’s communitarian conception of property was demonstrated by trials in collective land tenure, “in which the producer was defined by his guaranteed access to natural resources, rather than his independent ownership of them.”40 The complex county and state-level infrastructure that supported the association nevertheless operated in semi-clandestine fashion to evade the omnipresent specter of Southern white terror. Ali points to the resulting inability to create a “public movement culture” as decisive in determining the eventual fragmentation of the formidable Colored Alliance, which soon splintered and grew more moderate as members drifted into electoral politics.

Likewise, the Southern Improvement Company, a joint landholding venture between the Hampton Institute and the Tuskegee Institute, was initiated in 1901 under the leadership of Booker T. Washington.41 The initiative was germinated during the 1899 Hampton Negro Conference and inspired by the successes of the Colored Alliance. As a partial realization of Washington’s vision for the development of a Black land base led by farmers, small bankers, and petit bourgeois merchants, the company purchased seven abutting tracts totaling 4,000 acres in Macon County, Alabama. These were then subdivided into farms of 40 to 80 acres to be sold to Black families at a modest interest rate of six percent. Among the cooperative facilities constructed for the homesteaders were 35 houses, a sawmill, a cotton mill, a grist mill, a brick-making facility, and, eventually, a dedicated school. By 1911, 25 families owned their properties outright and the remaining 30 were in good standing on their mortgage payments. The model “social settlement,” however, was abandoned before the end of the decade due to the

40 Ali, In the Lion’s Mouth, 75.
41 Zabawa and Warren, “From Company to Community.”
compounding insecurities brought by monocultural cotton production, boll weevil infestation, and soil exhaustion, which ultimately jeopardized farmers’ ability to subsist and repay their debts.42

Shortly before Washington’s death in 1915, he presided over the purchase of 1,800 acres in Macon County for another experiment under the moniker of the Tuskegee Farm and Improvement Company.43 This would be the last of his many concerted attempts to promote cooperative agricultural development within the Black Belt as a means of achieving “salvation as a race.”44 In accordance with restrictive requirements for participation, select graduates of the Tuskegee Institute were given the opportunity to purchase 40 acres of arable land given that they were “‘married and with a family,’ . . . cooperative and industrious with a 'past reputation as a good worker' and for paying debts; in good health; that they should own livestock free of mortgage and should be able to make a down payment of 10 percent on the purchase price of the land.”45 These measures of respectability reflected more than mere business acumen on behalf of the company. As a preemptive defense against the constant threat of white violence looming just outside the community’s boundaries, Tuskegee administrators “attempted to enforce moral and ethical codes . . . which were extraordinarily strict even by late nineteenth-century comparisons.”46 The project accommodated an interwar peak of 17 families, yet was soon afterward declared a “losing proposition” by New Deal administrators surveying the region in 1935.47 The landholdings of the Tuskegee Farm

43 Zabawa and Warren, “From Company to Community.”
45 Zabawa and Warren, “From Company to Community,” 468.
47 Zabawa and Warren, “From Company to Community,” 468.
and Improvement Company were gradually eroded until 1949 when the last remnants were eventually sold.

The Arrival of the Almsgiver

Responding to the mounting economic fallout of the Great Depression and the apparent indifference toward Black communities exhibited by New Deal administrators, Du Bois once again turned to the centuries-old tradition of cooperative organization. The cascading effects of the financial crisis had hastened multiple developments in Du Bois’ thinking, leading him to a gradual embrace of Black nationalism and a partial retreat from the domain of politics in favor of coordinated economic action. Writing in the pages of *Current History* in 1935, he observed,

> Since 1929 Negro workers, like white workers, have lost their jobs, have had mortgages foreclosed on their farms and homes, have used up their small savings. But, in the case of the Negro worker, everything has been worse in larger or smaller degree; the loss has been greater and more permanent.  

He further decried the inadequate Washingtonian vision of enterprising self-help, observing that “technology advanced more rapidly than Hampton or Tuskegee could adjust their curricula.” Du Bois regarded cooperative activities as “peculiar instances of the 'advantage of the disadvantage’—of the way in which a hostile environment has forced the Negro to do for himself.” This moment, however, marked a fundamental change in strategy. In a rousing appeal for “a Negro nation within the nation,” Du Bois argued for the creation of a Black cooperative movement separate from white society. He concluded, “There exists today a chance for the Negroes to organize a cooperative State within their own group. By letting Negro farmers feed Negro artisans, and Negro

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technicians guide Negro home industries, and Negro thinkers plan this integration of cooperation . . . economic independence can be achieved.”

The FSA would come as close to any government body in heeding his call, even if the agency’s objectives were only circumstantially aligned with Du Bois’ shifting ideological horizons. Formed in the aftermath of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act in 1937, the FSA inherited a range of rehabilitation projects throughout the South from its predecessor organizations—respectively, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, and the Resettlement Administration. At the agency’s helm was Will W. Alexander, a methodist minister, chief of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and co-author of the widely disseminated 1935 study entitled The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, which effectively sketched a provisional agenda for his tenure as leader of the FSA. Alexander was no stranger to the abuses of the plantation system and the psychic structures of racial resentment upon which it depended. The publication soberly relayed, “The poor white connives in [the] abuse of the Negro; in fact, he is the most violent protagonist of it. . . . Because of their insistence upon the degrading of three million Negro tenants, five and a half million white workers continue to keep themselves in virtual peonage.”

The investigation concluded with three recommendations for government action: the federal purchase and lease or sale of large tracts of land to cotton tenants on favorable terms; the creation of supervisory offices to aid in financing and agricultural education; and the construction of cooperative

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51 Du Bois, “A Negro Nation within the Nation,” 270.
homesteads, schools and health facilities, and agrarian “communities of the European type.”

Correspondence with Du Bois dating to the early months of the New Deal had helped to lay the groundwork for Alexander’s eventual policy proposals. Responding to an inquiry regarding the availability of federal funding for “colored farm communities in the South,” Alexander expressed his approval. He wrote, “I am particularly interested in your suggestion of cooperation between the Negro farmer, the Negro worker, and the Negro professional man. I see no reason why the government should not be interested at least in financing a limited number of experiments in this connection.”

From the time of his appointment in September 1937 through his eventual resignation in June 1940, Alexander would keep Du Bois personally apprised of the agency’s operations among Black communities through written communication and shared reports. Moreover, evidence indicates that their professional relationship extended to more intimate social niceties, with Alexander at least once hosting Du Bois at his Atlanta home to discuss prospects for the burgeoning cooperative movement.

Nevertheless, in matters of race, the leaders of the FSA hewed closely to prevailing Southern practices of segregation and legalized discrimination. Federal administrators sought only to blunt the most egregious excesses of American racial capitalism without overturning the region’s political and economic order. Under the jurisdiction of the agency’s Rural Rehabilitation Division, the FSA eventually completed 150 rural resettlement projects, of which nine were all-Black and 26 were “infiltration”

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homesteads on the outskirts of purpose-built white communities. By 1940, approximately 1,393 Black families resided within federal resettlement projects, constituting only a small fraction of the hundreds of thousands of Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers that had been displaced since the onset of the financial crisis a decade earlier. In instances when the allocation of federal resources did approach racial parity, these programs worked to merely reproduce preexisting inequalities without actively widening the gap between Black and white recipients; in other instances, however, these initiatives measurably exacerbated racial disparities. The FSA’s comparatively more wide-reaching loan programs precluded participation by those with the greatest financial need. Client selection and loan eligibility was determined by actuarial calculation, functionally barring the most distressed applicants. As historian Sidney Baldwin notes, “Since clients had to pay for their farms, they had to be ‘good risks,’ with good credit ratings and reputations for hard work and honesty. The poverty-stricken condition of most Negro applicants automatically disqualified many of them as resettlement clients and tenant purchase borrowers.” This administrative incentive to “skim the cream” reliably served the entrenchment of the status quo.

The Tuskegee Land Use Demonstration Project was the first of three successive all-Black resettlement communities undertaken by New Deal administrators in the Black Belt region of Alabama. Initially conceived under the leadership of Tuskegee Institute president Robert R. Moton, an application for federal funding was approved by the AAA in January 1935 and land acquisition was subsequently entrusted to the Resettlement

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57 Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 188.
The primary objectives of the development were threefold: to remediate submarginal land unsuited for cultivation while assisting families in the purchase and operation of small farms; to provide a program of agricultural education and part-time employment; and to eliminate the need for federal relief payments and reduce future governmental expenditures. If successful, the initiative would serve as a “repeatable demonstration of what [could] be done on a large scale throughout the entire [Black] Belt.”

An early proposal for 40,000 acres was soon downsized to a patchwork of 10,000 acres purchased at a combined cost of $92,500. A contemporaneous report took note of the scarred and inhospitable landscape, the consequence of over a century of colonial settlement and extractive plantation agriculture:

Soil erosion is extremely pronounced and much havoc has been wrought to the land. Deep gullies, furrowed hillsides, and sand-bottomed valleys greet the eye from every angle. Attempts at hillside terracing have brought only moderate results because the heavy, spasmodic rainfalls soon destroy their usefulness. The absence of trees on the hillsides is a constant reminder of the exploitation of the forest resources of the purchase area.

As a result of environmental degradation, residents struggled to grow the staples necessary for subsistence. Among the 400 “stranded” families already residing within the project area, the vast majority lived in unsanitary conditions and their diets had been reduced to meat, corn meal, and molasses. Approximately 30 families would remain for the project’s duration while the remainder relocated off-site, some with federal assistance.

Supervisory offices were first set up on the nearby Tuskegee campus and afterward more than 200 relief laborers and administrative staff were deployed in the

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60 Zabawa and Warren, “From Company to Community,” 475.
project’s construction. In addition to aiding in soil conservation, erosion control, and land rehabilitation, workers demolished dilapidated shanties and erected standardized housing designed by Resettlement Administration architects. A site plan for the development stamped in 1935 shows a gridded arrangement of one-acre homesteads situated opposite an expanse of steeply sloping land designated for cooperative grazing and timber planting. Built with unadorned concrete floors and precast concrete studs, the semi-detached four-room dwellings nonetheless incorporated indoor plumbing and electrical wiring, marking a pronounced technological advancement for the region. Although the parallel goals of remediation and resettlement proceeded unhindered in the project’s early years, federal support for the Tuskegee Land Use Demonstration Project faltered by 1940. Absent sufficient funding to bring the development to completion, the community remained in limbo for nearly two decades while the Tuskegee Institute awaited legal transfer of administrative control. In the interim, a stream of families departed for the neighboring FSA community of Prairie Farms.

Internally coded RR-AL-28, the cooperative development of Prairie Farms likewise offered echoes of the many Tuskegee-affiliated experiments in agricultural land reform that had preceded it. In total, thirty Black families arrived from the Tuskegee Land Use Demonstration Project while another four joined the community from the surrounding area. Planning for the project began under the Resettlement Administration in 1935 before being handed over to the FSA only two years later. An ambitious proposal for the purchase of 30,000 acres was quickly pared down to approximately 3,000 acres of former cotton plantation land. The two adjacent tracts would ultimately accommodate 34

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63 SH-VA-10, FSA-3, Cartographic and Architectural Records Division, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

64 Warren and Zabawa, “The Origins of the Tuskegee National Forest.”
individual farms, a shared pasture, a cooperative, and a community building, which hosted the only high school in the region.\textsuperscript{65} Each farm, ranging from 40 to 134 acres, would also provide a house with plumbing, a drilled well, and electricity from the Tennessee Valley Authority as well as a barn, a poultry house, a vegetable house, and a pig pen. Amounting to a combined project budget of $201,683, the spartan development nevertheless cost less than half that of comparable white communities constructed throughout the South.\textsuperscript{66} As in the FSA's other all-Black developments, $20,000—or nearly 10 percent of the total funding—was earmarked for the five-year salary of a white community manager. Residents began moving into the development in waves in the spring of 1937 as soon as the first three- and four-room homes were constructed. Later that year, the Prairie Farms Cooperative Association was incorporated under the direction of community manager Coleman D. Camp.

A little over 100 miles away in Wilcox County, construction at Gee’s Bend commenced in September of 1937. Federal correspondence notes that homebuilding was undertaken by families while the FSA employed some “trained supervision.”\textsuperscript{67} Construction followed the agricultural calendar, during which families were periodically interrupted by the demands of planting and harvest, stretching the overall build-time to nearly three years. In total, 97 units were completed for a cumulative sum of $121,200. Each consisted of a parcel containing “a dwelling, barn, smokehouse, poultry house, sanitary privy, well, and garden” with the remainder of the land allocated for subsistence crops and small pastures.\textsuperscript{68} Additionally, each family entered into a contract to purchase,
which covered the individual $1,250 construction loan and another $100 for the land. Under the instruction of federally-appointed supervisors, families established programs of home-management as well as farm plans that included “what crops to plant, how much acreage to devote to each, what livestock to keep, and what garden crops to raise.” Simultaneously, the Gee’s Bend Cooperative Association achieved a level of operational stability, producing modest member dividends of 5 percent within its first two years. By 1943, the organization’s holdings consisted of a general merchandise store, cotton gin, grist mill, purebred sires, plowing and haying equipment, farm supplies, and farm repair shops. Federal audit reports conducted at irregular intervals show a steady increase in the Gee’s Bend Cooperative Association’s net worth from $16,315.35 in 1938 to $33,681.67 in 1941. When the FSA was finally dissolved in 1946, project manager W. A. Cammack transferred a title and mortgage to each family. Also remaining were the assets of the cooperative association, which would provide a financial basis for continued operation in the absence of federal oversight.

Cooperatives as Infrastructure of Survival

Although Du Bois would independently attempt to triangulate a Black cooperative network between the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Atlanta University in Georgia, and the Hampton Institute in Virginia throughout the 1940s, the entry of the United States into the war and the gradual disbanding of the New Deal alphabet agencies effectively brought an end to federal investment in cooperative development. (Additional elements within this proposed cooperative assemblage included University Homes, designed by

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70 Letter, NARA.
71 Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Frederick D. Patterson, November 3, 1941, MS 312, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.
architect Alfred Kastner, and Aberdeen Gardens, designed by architect Hilyard R. Robinson, the latter of which is the subject of the following chapter.\footnote{72}{“The Atlanta Housing Project,” \textit{The Crisis} 41, no. 6 (June 1934): 174–5.} By 1941, anticipating a shift in the political climate, Du Bois began courting charitable donors to fill a growing gap in funding, a gambit that met with little success. A representative of the Filene Good Will Fund—a sponsor of the Greenbelt consumers’ cooperative—responded diplomatically to a joint grant application submitted by Du Bois, Tuskegee Institute president Frederick R. Patterson, and Hampton Institute president Malcolm S. MacLean. “The times are such, and the demands on the Fund are so great that many projects which otherwise might have had more favorable consideration had to be rejected.”\footnote{73}{Letter from Percy S. Brown to W. E. B. Du Bois, January 10, 1942, MS 312, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.} Philanthropic capital, much like its federal counterpart, had begun to run dry.

Historian Sidney Baldwin attributes the simultaneous “turning of the tide” against governmental intervention in the rural South to “problems of national defense, partisan conflict related to the election campaign of 1940, growth of the economy . . . and the accumulation of complaints and grievances generally against the FSA.”\footnote{74}{Baldwin, \textit{Poverty and Politics}, 335.} A congressional budget standoff ensued in 1942 that all but definitively sounded the death knell for the New Deal’s ventures in agrarian land reform and what critics characterized as “sociological experimentation.”\footnote{75}{Baldwin, \textit{Poverty and Politics}, 352.} Glimpses of the impending Cold War could also be seen in the purging of perceived communist-sympathizers from administrative appointments, marking the end of a period in which flirtation with Soviet-style central planning was at least begrudgingly tolerated. Finally, in a fatal echo of the events that Du Bois chronicled in his 1935 tome, \textit{Black Reconstruction}, the reactionary opposition of
poor Southern whites further undermined the base of political support that the FSA had attempted to cultivate throughout the region.\textsuperscript{76}

If, for Du Bois, consumers’ and producers’ cooperatives constituted an integral component of an emancipatory Black radical horizon, in practice these organizational forms failed to mount a decisive antagonism toward the political and economic structures of American racial capitalism. Moreover, the prospect of uniting Black citydwellers with rural farmers to consolidate market power proved equally elusive, though generative of later land movements that would again take root in the Black Belt during the post-war period.\textsuperscript{77} In spite of the strategy’s apparent defeat, Black studies scholar Cedric J. Robinson urges that the revolutionary component of Du Bois’ Depression-era proposal for a separatist cooperative economy be taken seriously:

Du Bois’ analysis of the Depression . . . parallels his analysis of the crisis brought on by slavery in the earlier stage of American capitalist development. Both economically and politically, the Depression and the crisis of slavery would fundamentally transform the mode of capitalist relations. Furthermore, both had precipitated revolutionary movements and revolutionary social change.\textsuperscript{78}

By declining to retrospectively position Du Bois within a political framework that prefigured assimilation into fully-realized liberal subjecthood as its telos, Robinson insists that the promise of liberation from the entangled logics of racism, slavery, and capitalism lingers unresolved. The practical utility of cooperatives within a repertoire of anti-capitalist and decolonial world-building would persist as a question of strategic significance into the mid-century and beyond.

\textsuperscript{76} Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction}.
I seek to conclude by locating the legacy of New Deal infrastructural modernization within the framework of modernity/coloniality and its corresponding racial schema. As philosopher Walter D. Mignolo reminds us of the centuries-long march of capitalist development, “Hidden behind the rhetoric of modernity, economic practices dispensed with human lives, and knowledge justified racism and the inferiority of human lives that were naturally considered dispensable.” The differential valuation of human life was instrumental in the high-modernist project of Keynesian state-building and its attendant immiseration of a racialized “other”—namely, the most precarious stratum of Southern farmworkers long considered to be the region’s “economic shock-absorbers,” or what Du Bois termed a “labor reserve.” Race ordered the divisions between those enriched and those dispossessed, lending structural coherence to the state-subsidized reorganization of agricultural production and the subsequent expulsion of surplus laborers.

Rather than ameliorate the accumulated conditions of political and economic abandonment imposed upon these workers, however, federal administrators conferred upon them implements of survival. Paternalistically evoking the Washingtonian mantra of self-help, the state prescribed cooperation as a salve for the very injuries that it proceeded to inflict. As Irvin J. Hunt explains, from the vantage point of government officials, “cooperatives meant . . . cheaper welfare relief” and the attractive cost-savings generated by self-terminating social programs. Equally significant, the denial of robust cooperative practices deriving from the Black Atlantic served to affirm the subservient

81 Baldwin, Poverty and Politics, 25; Robinson, Black Marxism, 204.
82 Hunt, Dreaming the Present, 8.
role of Black Southerners, whose persistent poverty could be attributed to a lack of European-style cooperative education. With great restraint, Du Bois reflected upon this chain of events: “The Federal Government has rescued the South from the depths of depression, and sooner or later there is bound to come the question: how can this political instrument which is the Federal Government be used more widely and efficiently for the well-being of the mass of people?”

Beneath the triumphant narrative of modernization and national progress, racialized lives deemed disposable bore the recurring violence of economic development. Cooperatives, as state-administered infrastructure of survival, enabled them not to escape their subordinate position in the plantation economy of Jim Crow Alabama but, instead, to endure and resist within it.

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Fig. 1.1. Eroded landscape, Tuskegee Land Use Demonstration Project, Alabama, 1937. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 1.2. Site plan, Tuskegee Land Use Demonstration Project, Alabama, 1935. Farm Security Administration, Cartographic and Architectural Records Division, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
Fig. 1.3. Elevations, Tuskegee Land Use Demonstration Project, Alabama, 1935. Farm Security Administration, Cartographic and Architectural Records Division, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
Fig. 1.4. New home, Prairie Farms, Alabama, 1939. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 1.5. New home and other units, Prairie Farms, Alabama, 1939. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 1.6. Cooperative instruction, Gee’s Bend, Alabama, 1939. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 1.7. Cooperative store, Gee’s Bend, Alabama, 1939. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
CHAPTER TWO

The Plot and the Black Garden City in Industrial Virginia

The practice prevailed of giving the Negroes land to cultivate and expecting them to maintain themselves from the product of these lands.
—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Economic Co-operation Among Negro Americans*

But from early, the planters gave the slaves plots of land on which to grow food to feed themselves in order to maximize profits. We suggest that this plot system was . . . the focus of resistance to the market system and market values. For African peasants transplanted to the plot all the structure of values that had been created by traditional societies of Africa.
—Sylvia Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation”

When the National Industrial Recovery Act was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Roosevelt in June of 1933, the legislation conferred wide-reaching authority to address the extraordinary economic crisis enveloping the nation—a slow-moving catastrophe that federal intervention had already exacerbated. Agricultural subsidies distributed to Southern landowners had begun to fuel an exodus of displaced tenant farmers from the region’s cotton plantations and the simultaneous spread of unemployment throughout the industrialized North exerted pressure on the fledgling administration.¹ A circular issued that same year noted, “Underlying the enactment of this legislation is the widely held belief that large numbers of the population of this country face a period of employment difficulties so severe and prolonged that special measures of much more than an emergency relief character are required to deal with the situation.”²

Within a matter of weeks, a host of defining agencies of the New Deal period would establish their offices in Washington, D.C. Joining the ranks of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and the Home

² United States Department of the Interior, Division of Subsistence Homesteads, “Circular No. 1,” November 15, 1933.
Owners’ Loan Corporation were the Public Works Administration and the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. The latter of these, situated within the Department of Interior under the tenure of Secretary Harold L. Ickes, was tasked with initiating homestead projects and granting loans toward the resettlement of impoverished families in subsistence farming communities.

Maligned by contemporary critics due to its association with the back-to-the-land movement, the subsistence homestead program was alternately derided as “sentimental” and “defeatist.” Influential urban planner Catherine Bauer lamented that the projects would create “a new American peasantry with a standard of living and an outlook for the future probably about equal to that obtainable in the Balkan rural regions.” Others interrogated the air of pastoral nostalgia that accompanied the government proposal, questioning the economic rationale for merely “transferring” urban and rural poverty “from one area to another.” The romantic agrarian imaginary evoked by the program was likely not shared by prospective Black homesteaders, many of whom “had suffered on the land and . . . desperately . . . sought to get away to the city.” Nevertheless, proponents of the program pointed to the security afforded by subsistence agriculture in the wake of the ruinous financial crisis that had left millions of waged workers in destitute poverty. Baptist minister Vernon Johns reflected sagely, “The farmer is having his money troubles but he is the only poor man today crying on a full stomach.”

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4 “Back to the Farm—For What?” *The Crisis* 42, no. 5 (May 1935): 147.
Though primarily intended to ease the burden on federal relief rolls, W. E. B. Du Bois perceived within the state-backed initiative a momentous opportunity to shift the balance of economic power in the Jim Crow South. He observed,

One of the most feasible remedies is to make it possible for the worker to support himself with food and shelter even if temporarily he is out of employment or holding out for [a] higher wage. The one method of accomplishing this is by small homesteads where the worker and his family by extra and healthful outdoor work can raise his own food.7

Reading beyond its palliative function, Du Bois was quick to seize upon the transformative potentials of the controversial federal program, identifying subsistence farming as a possible counterweight to the coercive forces of capital and the exploitative wage relation that acted as a cudgel in the conscription of labor.

The question of Black participation in the subsistence homestead program soon became a national flashpoint, with the heated debate reverberating throughout sectors of the federal government, civil rights organizations, and the popular press alike. Federal officials initially vowed to allocate ten percent of the agency’s $25,000,000 budget toward the construction of Black homestead communities, however accompanying requirements for residential segregation prompted a public outcry. Undeterred by these conditions, Du Bois eagerly voiced his support. Writing to the Assistant Director of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads Clarence E. Pickett in November 1933, he stated, “I sincerely believe that the only hope of the Negro farmer lies in the organization of farm communities by Negroes and under their economic control and direction.”8 Firing back by telegraph after word of the exchange had spread, NAACP president Walter W. White

8 Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Clarence E. Pickett, November 29, 1933, Box 4, Correspondence Concerning Proposed Subsistence Homesteads Projects, 1933–1935, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
demanded that Du Bois rescind his statement “at once,” asking for a “complete denial” of his support for the homestead initiative—a request that Du Bois roundly ignored.\footnote{Telegram from Walter White to W. E. B. Du Bois, November 24, 1933, MS 312, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.} White faulted Du Bois for providing the federal government with ammunition in its public relations offensive, admonishing,

Thoughtful colored people will be opposed to following the advice that ‘groups of communities and farms inhabited by colored folk should be voluntarily formed’ where they involve government-financed and approved arrangements like the Homestead Subsistence projects. It is unfortunate that Dr. Du Bois’s editorial has been used, we learn, by certain government officials at Washington to hold up admission of Negroes to one of the government-financed relief projects.\footnote{Walter White, “Segregation—A Symposium,” The Crisis 41, no. 3 (March 1934): 80.}

The confrontation between the two high-profile public figures would only grow more fractious as early preparations for the homestead communities proceeded.

Over the following year, Du Bois published several editorials on the subject of New Deal housing and segregation in the pages of the NAACP’s journal, The Crisis. Du Bois’ thinking on the topic was nuanced and strategic, however his critiques brought to the surface fissures that had begun to divide the organization. While Du Bois was a vocal critic of Harold L. Ickes, chastising his appointment of white officials to advise on “Negro affairs,” he argued that segregation within federal homesteads was a necessary evil and one vastly preferable to the alternative—namely, nominally integrated communities in which Black residents “would be given no chance to enter on equal terms with the whites.”\footnote{W. E. B. Du Bois, “N.R.A. and Appointments,” The Crisis 40, no. 10 (October 1933): 237; Du Bois, “Subsistence Homestead Colonies,” 85.} Du Bois had witnessed firsthand the degrading conditions that accompanied the subordination of Black residents within majority-white Southern communities: these included deprivation of political rights, separation of social
institutions, and curtailment of economic opportunities. By subverting federal policies and voluntarily self-organizing on the basis of race, he suggested that Black homesteaders could reap the shared benefits of economic cooperation. He claimed, “They would have a chance of making these . . . model settlements of which anybody would be proud, and they would do more in the long run to break down the Color Line than they could by any futile and helpless denunciation of race prejudice.”\(^\text{12}\) As he neared his final editorial in the publication that he had overseen for nearly 25 years, his exhortations grew more urgent. “The question is then, are we going to stand out and refuse the inevitable and inescapable government aid because we first wish to abolish the Color Line? This is not simply tilting at windmills; it is, if we are not careful, committing race suicide.”\(^\text{13}\) Ultimately, the expanding ideological rift between the NAACP and Du Bois led him to tender his resignation from the magazine in June of 1934.\(^\text{14}\)

Only weeks later, a federally-appointed architect arrived in the tidewater region of Virginia to begin work on a model settlement reminiscent of Du Bois' vision. Sited across the James River from the city of Norfolk, Aberdeen Gardens was the only of 30 proposed all-Black subsistence developments that would actually be completed.\(^\text{15}\) Originally called the Newport News Homesteads, the project was conceived by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in response to a coordinated “push” by local residents in the historic community of Hampton—an area which had played a pivotal role in the Emancipation Circuit more than half a century prior.\(^\text{16}\) A March 1935 press release by the short-lived


\(^{15}\) Wilson, *African American Architects*.

New Deal agency announced the allocation of $245,000 for the all-Black agrarian development, including funding earmarked for the purchase of 200 acres of land, later decreased to 110 acres, and the construction of 100 homes, later increased to 158 homes. The memorandum notes, “The project is the second one to receive approval of a series of projects being undertaken by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in order to give the one-tenth of the country's population which is colored its fair share of the $25,000,000 which Congress appropriated for subsistence homesteading.”

Elsewhere the portion of federal funding expended for Black homesteads fell far short of the “fair share” that officials touted as their goal. The previous settlement to which the March 1935 press release referred was in fact a majority-white agrarian community constructed in West Virginia—a parallel project that was plagued with exclusionary tenant selection processes. As journalist John P. Davis recounted, the federally-appointed project manager refused to accept applications from prospective Black residents. Davis remarked,

Subsistence homesteads have been planned on a strictly ‘lily-white’ basis. The more than 200 Negro applicants for the first project at Arthurdale, West Virginia were not even considered. Mr. Bushrod Grimes (then in charge of the project) announced that the project was to be open only to ‘native white stock.’ As far north as Dayton, Ohio, where state laws prohibit any type of segregation against Negroes, the federal government has extended its ‘lily-white’ policy.

Davis further cited Aberdeen Gardens as a “Jim-Crow [project] for Negroes,” alleging that “the new administration seeks in its program of social planning to perpetuate ghettos of Negroes for fifty years to come.” In total, Division of Subsistence Homesteads chief M. L. Wilson and his successor, Charles E. Pynchon, considered plans for 30 all-Black

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19 Davis, “A Black Inventory of the New Deal,” 142.
projects and approved sites for 15 but had not broken ground on a single one by the time of the agency’s dissolution in May 1935.20 While administrators frequently attributed the failure of Black rural developments to opposition by white stakeholders, Black critics alleged that they tacitly invited white protest, to which they then readily capitulated. This was the case in the Federal Housing Administration-financed development of Swantown, located in neighboring Warwick County, Virginia, where Black homesteaders were forcibly evicted and their condemned houses resold to white homebuyers after reports of a sewage system leak.21

Aberdeen Gardens, however, proved to be resilient. Perilously positioned between a capricious federal bureaucracy and the white paternalist sponsorship of the neighboring Hampton Institute, the experimental community nonetheless became a site of expanded Black homeownership during a period of protracted economic crisis and de jure racial apartheid.22 After plans for the development were absorbed by the Resettlement Administration within the Department of Agriculture, Administrator Rexford G. Tugwell and his Deputy Will W. Alexander renewed enthusiasm for the faltering project in Washington, D.C. Perhaps equally significant was the hiring of a lone Black employee in an advisory role. Joseph H. B. Evans was named “Race Relations Specialist” for the Resettlement Administration in 1935 and subsequently “followed the work of all programs, sought to prevent discrimination against Negro families, and tried to place more Negro personnel at every level where Negroes were involved.”23 A 1937 interview published in the local Black-owned newspaper, The Norfolk Journal and Guide, notes

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20 Holley, “The Negro in the New Deal Resettlement Program.”
22 Carroll, “The Racial Politics of Place.”
that he “immediately went to work securing jobs for other Negroes with the result that now more than 200 earn their livelihood from that department of [the] federal government.” In tandem with lead architect Hilyard R. Robinson, who had been awarded a federal contract for the project in 1934, a distributed network of Black proponents worked inside and outside of government to ensure the community’s construction.

This chapter begins with an account of the Depression-era conditions that led to the development of Aberdeen Gardens in coastal Virginia. In the face of reactionary white opposition, the model community demonstrated the viability of federal investment in Black-led subsistence homesteads as a formula for promoting individual homeownership and reintegrating a racialized labor reserve into a recomposed circuit of economic value production. Weaving the scholarship of W. E. B. Du Bois, philosopher Sylvia Wynter, and economist Jessica Gordon-Nembhard, the chapter then retraces a brief lineage of the plantation plot system underlying the agrarian community—a disciplinary apparatus that was oriented toward racial subjection yet which ultimately enabled the cultivation of practices of resistance. Additionally, the influence of the neighboring Hampton Institute materialized in tensions between competing, and often overlapping, tendencies within a Black American political milieu of the 1930s—notably, a Black entrepreneurial wager on proprietary conceptions of economic advancement and a Black radical desire to build forms of collective life unbounded by the strictures of American

racial capitalism. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the significance of Aberdeen Gardens within the fraught history of the Federal Housing Administration, considering the qualified successes of the unrepeated federal experiment alongside its ambivalent legacy as a line of flight not fully realized.

A Model Community “By Negroes, For Negroes”

Amid the convergent currents of the Great Depression and the Great Migration, Virginia soon found itself along the route of an accelerating Southern exodus. Hastened by the misguided federal policies of the AAA, migration reached a fever pitch between 1930 and 1940, with approximately 200,000 Black tenant farmers and sharecroppers leaving their homes to travel northward. Migrants from neighboring North Carolina and as far south as Alabama poured into the state’s urban centers seeking work, though often discovering that what awaited them was little better than the circumstances they had escaped. In the coastal Virginia region, this gradual process of Black proletarianization is described by historian Earl Lewis, who characterizes it as “the movement of Blacks into the industrial labor force as wage earners whose lives were shaped by racism as well as the competitive interplay between labor and capital under capitalism.”

Black arrivals to the industrial shipbuilding city of Hampton, Virginia were confronted with low wages, insufficient hours, strict segregation, and poor housing conditions. For Black workers already laboring in Hampton’s shipyard industry, many were reduced to part-time employment while others were denied work altogether. Lewis notes,

As employers made cutbacks, losses mounted. Scores fell victim to the Southern proclivity to replace Black workers with jobless white workers, which altered established patterns of racial labor market segmentation. . . . Along the waterfront,

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the [International Longshoremen’s Association] proved powerless to stop the replacement of Blacks with whites.29

Further compounding the effects of racialized unemployment was the string of bank failures sweeping the nation. In 1933, the collapse of the local Metropolitan Bank and Trust, the country’s largest Black-owned bank, left devastated depositors with just a fraction of any remaining savings.

The coastal Virginia region became a hotbed of political activity, with local representatives of Marcus Garvey’s Black nationalist Universal Negro Improvement Association frequently rubbing shoulders with Black Communist Party officials, socialist union organizers, and charismatic religious zealots.30 Hampton’s Black population had more than doubled since the onset of World War I and the combination of rampant poverty and entrenched white paternalist governance produced a fertile recruiting ground for an array of radical causes ranging the political spectrum. Well-attended Depression-era rallies and demonstrations brought the broader Hampton area to the attention of military officials in Washington, D.C., who described it as “the most ‘sensitive’ spot in the entire Mid-Atlantic and Southern regions.”31 Importantly, political mobilization around employment discrimination and deteriorating living conditions also sought to establish a clear connection between the workplace and the home during this period. In response to the growing sense of discontent, Black middle-class business owners and civic leaders attempted to redirect attention toward the domestic sphere, promoting it as the proper realm for pursuing social and economic advancement in the face of Jim Crow.

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29 Lewis, In Their Own Interests, 112.
31 Lewis, In Their Own Interests, 135.
It was under these circumstances that Aberdeen Gardens was initially conceived in 1934, with officials from the Division of Subsistence Homesteads proposing that the combined proximity of agriculture and industry could provide full employment for impoverished Black families in the surrounding community. Among the stated goals of the project were to help Black residents “leave their present environment, to give them an opportunity to utilize their spare time in the production of the food they require, and to lift them to a higher social and health level.”

Division of Subsistence Homesteads chief Charles E. Pynchon concisely articulated the stakes of the development: “This project derives one of its most significant features from the fact that it is a project by Negroes, for Negroes.”

The 1934 appointment of Washington, D.C.-based architect Hilyard R. Robinson would also set an important precedent and later impact a series of downstream hiring decisions. Charged by the agency with the task of “architectural planning for projects where Negroes are included,” Robinson shrewdly leveraged his position to bring onto the federal payroll a cadre of young Black draftsmen and engineers. Among these were numerous recent graduates from the Tuskegee Institute and Howard University’s Department of Architecture, where Robinson was on leave as faculty chair.

Nevertheless, for Aberdeen Gardens, the racially-determined, uneven development sanctioned by the New Deal was reflected in the project budget, with the per unit expenditure approximately half that of comparable white settlements.

Accordingly, Robinson attempted to keep costs to a minimum by “making the maximum use of native building materials and simple construction methods.”

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34 Stuart Patterson, “A New Pattern of Life: The Public Past and Present of Two New Deal Communities,” PhD diss., (Emory University, 2006), 197.
35 Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World.*
36 Patterson, “A New Pattern of Life,” 197.
leisure landscapes of the contemporaneously constructed all-white Greenbelt Towns, Aberdeen Gardens provided the necessities for self-reliance along with a limited selection of modern amenities. The ruggedness of the surrounding terrain was well-documented, with the presence of poisonous timber rattlesnakes frequently reported by construction workers. Moreover, within the wooded 110-acre subdivision, each of the 158 houses would be allotted a small garden plot, orchard, chickens, and pigs in addition to communally shared mules and dairy cows.\(^{37}\) Eschewing the functionalism of the nascent International Style with which he had experimented elsewhere, Robinson instead opted for a regional vernacular that he believed was better suited to the agrarian context. He concluded, “[T]he scientifically and functionally planned house is not altogether acceptable to the average homesteader—Negro or white. In the beginning, our planning must serve tradition and sentiment as well as the practical.”\(^{38}\) Once completed, the modest two-family dwellings, each connected by a garage and constructed of solid brick, would feature indoor plumbing and heating, electrical wiring, telephone service, and major domestic appliances.

Even still, Democratic Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia condemned what he regarded to be “silly extravagances and costly absurdities” in the homestead community, “such as electricity, refrigerators, factory-made furniture, and indoor privies”—a line of attack that would culminate in his public opposition to the development.\(^{39}\) Following Senator Byrd’s lead, the local \textit{Daily Press} published a series of editorials attempting to undermine the project, contending, in accordance with the South’s “whites first” policy,
that any government spending on Aberdeen Gardens was a misuse of taxpayers’ money.\textsuperscript{40} Aggrieved by the diversion of state funds to support Black residents while white poverty endured—albeit at a starkly lower rate—white Hampton residents clamored for a change in the occupancy policy. Perhaps emboldened by the successful expropriation of Black homes in Swantown, hundreds drafted a petition demanding that the planned development be turned over to white families. Signers alleged that the community violated the county’s established boundaries for segregation and would degrade their property values. Similarly, the Peninsula Association of Commerce accused the presiding federal officials of “inflaming local race relations, heedlessly dismissing earlier white protests, and . . . ignoring concerns raised by Black leaders nervous about building Black-occupied homes so close to white farms.”\textsuperscript{41} The implication of this latter complaint was likely a threat of violence.

Notwithstanding intimidation from the growing white mob, a small contingent of supporters within the Resettlement Administration resolved to override opposition and ensure the development’s completion. Vocal advocates included Will W. Alexander, who took over as Administrator in 1937, and the agency’s sole Black affairs advisor, Joseph H. B. Evans. In a public statement, Evans made the Resettlement Administration’s stance clear: “That project was planned by Negroes, engineered by Negroes, and is being built by Negroes and will be occupied by Negro tenants.”\textsuperscript{42} He later elaborated, “It's inconceivable that the Resettlement Administration would change its plans for setting up the Aberdeen project for Negroes. The most outstanding fact about the development is that it has been directed and built by colored men and has offered opportunities for

\textsuperscript{40} Carroll, “The Racial Politics of Place,” 527.  
\textsuperscript{41} Carroll, “The Racial Politics of Place,” 523.  
\textsuperscript{42} Carroll, “The Racial Politics of Place,” 524.
trained Negroes in technical fields.”

Evans encouraged families to make their enthusiasm for the project known by continuing to file applications, suggesting that this would be the most direct method to convey to the federal government “that there is a real demand for the homes when they are completed and ready for occupancy.”

Concessions, however, were ultimately made to appease neighboring white landowners who insisted that the homes be concealed from view. Accordingly, a forested buffer region was added around the perimeter of the development, effectively cordonning the community in isolation. In a Jim Crow-era recuperation of garden city planning principles, the green belt, originally intended to ward against neighboring construction, was functionally retooled as a mechanism of segregation.

The first two model homes opened for display in December 1936 and move-ins began early the following summer, continuing through the fall of 1937. In total, 275 applications were received by the community manager William R. Walker Jr., from which 158 families were approved by an appointed home economics specialist. As part of the agreement signed by each head of household, an initial five-year rental period was required—later shortened to one year—after which tenants would be given an option to purchase their homes outright with a long-term, low-interest Federal Housing Administration-backed mortgage. Ultimately, 871 Black workers had been employed in the construction of the model community in skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled roles, of

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43 MacKay, “No Rugged Individualist is New Dealer Joseph H. B. Evans.”
45 Holley, “The Negro in the New Deal Resettlement Program.”
which fully two-thirds were white-collar employees. A profile in the Norfolk Journal and Guide noted, “The entire Aberdeen project is a monument to the skilled artisanship of Negro craftsmen and unskilled labor. From its very inception, the work was entrusted to an all-colored personnel drawn from all parts of the country.” Yearlong commemorations for the project’s opening brought visits by Robert C. Weaver, Adviser on Negro Affairs for the Department of Interior, as well as foreign dignitaries. Furthermore, streets running through the development were ceremonially named for “distinguished Negro leaders of Virginia,” including former Virginia congressman John Mercer Langston and abolitionist and teacher Mary S. Peake.

A 1937 article in Architectural Forum featured photographs and a brief description of the completed development. Though notably absent of any mention of Robinson’s role as lead architect, the publication named the model community “a significant contribution” to the federal government’s burgeoning program in low-cost housing construction. The issue relayed the axial arrangement of homes, oriented along Aberdeen Road and sited on subsistence plots ranging from three-eighths to one-half acre, describing in summary detail their modest interior organization:

The plot arrangement of this project provides for a concentrated group of living units surrounded by a greenbelt of forest land and truck gardens. . . . The homes are constructed in two-family units, being connected by attached garages which also serve as workshops and laundries. The houses are of seven types and vary in size from three to five rooms. They are two stories in height. The living room can be converted into an auxiliary bedroom.

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54 “Resettlement Houses,” 496.
Additionally, at the center of the project was a shared auditorium and six-room schoolhouse slated to be operated under the supervision of Elizabeth City County. The combined educational and civic space, though considerably downsized from an earlier 1935 proposal, would also serve the cooperative Aberdeen Gardens Association in the years to come, for which it would provide a kitchen, canning facility, and meeting space.  

**Plot and Plantation**

The plantation and its accompanying plot system provide an analytical model through which to position Aberdeen Gardens, a place wrestling to break free from the temporal hold of slavery and its propertied afterlife. Continuing after the immediate period of transatlantic slavery, the plantation persisted as a set of spatial and economic relations ordering the uneven racial geographies of the United States. In his plantation economy thesis, economist George L. Beckford associates this phenomenon with dual processes of underdevelopment and impoverishment, in which the technological investment and capital accumulation propelling plantocratic extraction were dislocated to metropolitan centers. These defining characteristics in turn lead him to identify the Jim Crow-era American South as an internally-colonized, plantation economy—an observation with particular explanatory power for the unevenly borne agricultural and industrial upheavals of the Great Depression. As geographer Katherine McKittrick echoes,

This plantation history not only generated North Atlantic metropolitan wealth and exacerbated dispossession among the unfree and indentured, it also instituted an incongruous racialized economy that lingered long after emancipation and

55 Patterson, “A New Pattern of Life.”
independence movements in the Americas; and that . . . protracted colonial logic of the plantation came to define many aspects of postslave life. 57

Moreover, within this formulation, the plantation subtended capitalist value production rather than merely existing alongside it as a relic of a prior economic system. Accordingly, the mass expulsion of Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers and the mechanization of Southern agriculture inaugurated by the New Deal “represented not a moment of ‘transition’ to capitalist social relations’ but a ‘movement from capital-scarce, labor-intensive plantation production to capital-intensive, labor-surplus neo-plantation production.’” 58

In the context of the antebellum American South, the reciprocal transformation of planted bodies and planted landscapes, the shaping of natural and built environments to facilitate control and surveillance, and the repurposing of vernacular architectural typologies had worked in concert to sustain a plantation economy of racialized subjugation. As noted by architectural historian Dell Upton, the houses of enslaved people within the American plantation system were in many ways indistinguishable from those of impoverished white farmers, “but whereas poor whites’ spartan conditions reflected their own lack of economic success, the poverty of slaves on large plantations was the result of the appropriation of their labor for the enrichment of the planter.” 59 The imperative to produce a visual grammar that would differentiate the dwellings of poor whites from enslaved Blacks, however, provides an important historical subtext. Echoing the organicist theories of nineteenth-century architectural historians who treated race and building style as “two empirical expressions of natural law,” white slaveholders imposed

58 Ciarán Finlayson, Perpetual Slavery (Berlin: Floating Opera Press, 2023), 32.
ideas about racial character through the spare adornment of slave quarters. In spite of the well-documented skills of enslaved Black artisan builders, crudeness of materials and construction was encouraged so that the structures would look “sufficiently primitive to whites.” As a result, craft artistry was often concealed within inconspicuous interior details that were functionally hidden from the view of slave owners. As architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright writes, “The cabins were inexpensive, they represented dominant white attitudes about Black domesticity, Black sexuality, and Black standards of character and cleanliness; the houses were seen by the whites as an expression of the fundamental differences that legitimated segregation policies.” Though coincident with the emergence of chattel slavery, the architectural form of the slave cabin endured well beyond emancipation, when it was adapted to maintain a regime of racial subjection during Reconstruction and its aftermath.

Crucially, the area around these dwellings permitted space in which poultry, livestock, and gardens could be tended. According to Sylvia Wynter, the plot operated simultaneously as a pernicious mechanism of extraction, whereby enslaved laborers were made to produce provisions for their own subsistence, and as a semi-autonomous space of resistance to the plantation system, in which lifeways preceding transatlantic slavery could be preserved and transmitted through the cultivation of land. This was also the place of plotting—where plans for escape and marronage were hatched. Economic historian Jessica Gordon-Nembhard points to plots as sites of “cooperation in the form of

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62 Wright, “The 'Big House' and the Slave Quarters,” 57.
63 Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” 100.
insurrection,” noting their spatial function in the establishment of complex mobile networks for the rescue of fugitive slaves.\textsuperscript{64} Similarly, the small parcels of land facilitated communal exchange. She writes, “Even though separated from their clans and nations in Africa, enslaved as well as the few free African Americans continued African practices during the antebellum period—cooperating economically to till small garden plots to provide more variety and a healthier diet for their families.”\textsuperscript{65} The exercise of life-sustaining traditions within the confines of tightly bounded enclosures extended into the early postbellum decades and beyond.

The reappearance of the plantation plot structure in Aberdeen Gardens is registered in a 1935 site plan that depicted small rectangular parcels apportioned behind each semi-detached residence.\textsuperscript{66} Unlike some of the more ambitious experiments in agrarian land reform undertaken by the Farm Security Administration in the Deep South, Aberdeen Gardens retained “the designation ‘Gardens’ in recognition that the modest plots around its houses were intended for household production” only.\textsuperscript{67} As historian Stuart Patterson elaborates, “On their relatively small plots, families would be expected to support a variety of berry bushes and ‘fruits, sorghum cane, poultry, hogs, bees, [and] milk cows,’ for which . . . Robinson included drawings in his sketches.”\textsuperscript{68} Personnel were dispatched from the Hampton Institute to oversee the agricultural program, which intended to supplement each household with at least a hundred dollars worth of produce each year. Additionally, in conjunction with the garden plot system, the Rosenwald Fund

\textsuperscript{66} SH-VA-10, FSA-20, Cartographic and Architectural Records Division, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
\textsuperscript{67} Patterson, “A New Pattern of Life,” 188.
\textsuperscript{68} Patterson, “A New Pattern of Life,” 200–1.
provided grant money to hire one live-in agricultural and domestic advisor from Howard University. Although wire fences demarcated rigid property boundaries within the imposed plot arrangement, forms of collectivity would ultimately take root, with many families sharing their land for husbanding hogs, mules, and cows and tending chickens. While the farming and gardening program brought limited sustenance, families reportedly “took to the work with quiet and, by all accounts, well-rewarded determination.”

From “Racial Uplift” to Economic Cooperation

In addition to the backing of sympathetic leaders at the Resettlement Administration, Aberdeen Gardens was afforded necessary political cover by the advocacy of the neighboring Hampton Institute, located less than five miles from the homestead community. Founded in 1868 during the height of Reconstruction and originally known as the Hampton Agricultural and Industrial School, the Hampton Institute was established by colonial missionary and Union Army general Samuel Chapman Armstrong as an assimilation-oriented vocational school for former slaves and Indigenous youth. Consistent with the paternalistic pedagogy of the Freedmen’s Bureau, the organization purportedly sought to imbue principles of self-discipline, temperance, and restraint through a program of theologically-inflected agricultural and industrial education. More pointedly, critics alleged that the curriculum of “racial uplift” efficiently produced wage earners while naturalizing Black inferiority and Jim Crow segregation.

An 1885 report published by the school on the state of its teaching mission notes,

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To Negro and Indian alike the gospel of work comes as a revelation, and while it is not always accepted without a struggle, yet none the less is its influence healthful and strengthening, and the record of our graduates of both races shows that Labor and Prayer are weapons of which most of them have learned, in part at least, the unconquerable power.72

Students of the “Hampton Ideal” learned to be farmers, domestic workers, masons, and teachers, facilitating integration into the Southern labor force, though largely in positions of economic subservience.

Central to Hampton’s pedagogical project was the civilizing function of the modest single-family home in the rehabilitation of the formerly enslaved. Propelled by white fears that a newly emancipated population would prove idle and unruly by declining conscripted labor, the home became a useful apparatus for “grafting morality onto economics” and encouraging the virtues of productivity.73 As discussed by architectural historian Maura Lucking, this educational mission was bound up with the Lockean ideology of improvement, Jeffersonian yeomanship, and nineteenth-century ideas about the reformatory power of the physical spaces of domesticity. She observes,

In tandem with masculinized discourses that privileged property ownership and the physical labor thereof as the defining characteristics of freedom, the feminized cult of domesticity placed upon the home suggested that the most effective way to activate the reformatory (and assimilative) powers of property ownership was to emphasize the proper economies of labor, health, comfort and taste in the house itself as well as the modern efficiencies of subsistence agriculture, a combination . . . invoked repeatedly under the Freedmen’s Bureau as well as . . . in later industrial curricula.74

Consequently, the physical construction, management, and proper conduct of the individual household was a primary subject of Hampton’s coursework, with

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gender-segregated classes set against the backdrop of the home spanning subjects such as subsistence farming, carpentry, and home economics.

Booker T. Washington, who graduated from the Hampton Institute in 1875, became a prominent proponent of agricultural and industrial education as an alternative to more assertive modes of Black political organization in the aftermath of Reconstruction. (This period also coincided with Virginia’s passage of the Walton Act, the Virginia Republican Party’s expulsion of Black members, and an ensuing onslaught of literacy tests and poll taxes designed to reinforce white rule; by 1891, Virginia had no remaining Black political representatives.\textsuperscript{75}) Washington’s autobiography, first published in serial in 1900, contained a number of recollections of his time at the Hampton Institute and his personal relationship with Samuel Chapman Armstrong.\textsuperscript{76} As a contributor to “The American Negro Exhibit” at the 1900 Paris Exhibition, Washington displayed a selection of aspirational before-and-after photographs depicting the changes which the Hampton Institute strived to make toward the material advancement of Black communities.\textsuperscript{77} An illustrative diptych showed a dilapidated “old-time” cabin alongside a newly constructed two-story home, juxtaposing the substandard living conditions of uneducated Black Southerners with the class-ascendant residences of Hampton graduates. The white Victorian ideal toward which students were expected to aspire was embodied by the

\textsuperscript{75} Davis, \textit{The Emancipation Circuit}.


seemingly trivial details of the domestic interior, including “polished cutlery, [a] silk shawl slung over the shiny piano, [and a] hand-painted oil of the Rockies.”

Fittingly, the exhibition would also stage an encounter between the accommodationist principles of Washington and the increasingly confrontational activist program of W. E. B. Du Bois—respectively embodying two pillars of turn-of-the-century Black American political thought. It was in Paris, opposite photographs of the Hampton Institute’s acquiescent vision of “racial uplift” that Du Bois first articulated his critique of the “color line” as the formative problem of the twentieth century. Later reflecting upon the ideological divide between Washington and himself in this earlier period, Du Bois remarked,

I believed in the higher education of a Talented Tenth who through their knowledge of modern culture could guide the American Negro into a higher civilization. I knew that without this the Negro would have to accept white leadership, and that such leadership could not always be trusted. . . . Mr. Washington, on the other hand, believed that the Negro as an efficient worker could gain wealth and that eventually through his ownership of capital he would be able to achieve a recognized place in American culture. . . . These two theories of Negro progress were not absolutely contradictory. Neither I nor Booker Washington understood the nature of capitalistic exploitation of labor, and the necessity of a direct attack on the principle of exploitation as the beginning of labor uplift.  

While Washington remained a steadfast crusader for the Hampton Institute’s incrementalist doctrine of “racial uplift” until his death in 1915, Du Bois’ ideological evolution would traverse pan-Africanism, Black nationalism, and communism in the ensuing decades, eventually leading him to recenter his efforts around the promotion of economic cooperation among Black Americans.

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By the 1930s, the white-led Hampton Institute had undergone modest reforms, marking its gradual transition from a normal school to a traditional liberal arts college curriculum. Arthur Howe, the son-in-law of Samuel Chapman Armstrong, was appointed president after the untimely death of his predecessor, who drowned in 1930. A conservative Presbyterian minister and former Yale University football coach, Howe evidently came to the role with no administrative experience, let alone any familiarity with the region’s Black or Indigenous communities. His tenure was riddled with conflict, including student resistance to his dismissal of numerous Black faculty members and his failure to appoint Black applicants to administrative positions. In a 1935 commencement address signaling his commitment to continuing the school’s founding mission, Howe championed the moral importance of creating a sound domestic environment, calling it “the grave problem of civilization.”

Paeans to the president after his ouster would contrast starkly with his decidedly mixed reputation on campus. (“He became president of the Hampton Institute, taking his place in the Apostolic Succession, which began with that militant saint, Major General Armstrong, and was dedicated to the advancement of the education of Negroes in America.”) Nevertheless, Howe was reportedly instrumental in obtaining federal funding for the segregated Aberdeen Gardens project. In a telegram addressed to first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who had taken notice of the homestead program, Howe advocated bluntly, “Knowing your interest in subsistence homesteads, I wire to urge Negro projects be approved and developed separately.”

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Like other white members of the Aberdeen Gardens sponsoring committee, Howe was simultaneously central to ensuring the project’s success and a figure whose motives aroused cautious distrust among Hampton’s Black communities. Unsurprisingly, Aberdeen Gardens presented a dilemma to some prospective residents for whom participation in the federal project risked complicity with Jim Crow. Support for the development inevitably extended segregation and affirmed the rule of Hampton’s paternalistic white leadership, who tellingly characterized the project in the Daily Press as a reward for “colored workmen of good behavior.” However, as observed by historian Fred Carroll, Black communities within the region entertained paternalism only insofar as it coincided with their own interests and values. He notes, “They worked to subvert Virginia’s system of managed race relations, even as they operated within it.” In practice, this meant selectively engaging with the Hampton Institute’s ideology of “racial uplift” while also advancing more agential forms of coordinated action. This adaptive strategy might be understood through the concept of mētis, which anthropologist James C. Scott defines as the set of practical skills developed to negotiate a constantly changing environment. Adept at navigating the “double environment” posed by a Black community circumscribed within a white polity, residents simultaneously turned to cooperative organization as a means of harnessing their collective economic power.

Du Bois, who began advocating for consumer cooperatives as early as 1907 with the publication of Economic Co-operation Among Negro Americans, regarded cooperative activities as “peculiar instances of the 'advantage of the disadvantage'—of the

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way in which a hostile environment has forced the Negro to do for himself.”89 He expanded upon his thinking in *The Crisis* in 1934: “Where separation of mankind into races, groups and classes is compulsory, either by law or custom, and whether that compulsion be temporary or permanent, the only effective defense that the segregated and despised group has against complete spiritual and physical disaster, is internal self-organization for self-respect and self-defense.”90 Accordingly, within Du Bois’ dialectical reasoning, segregation, which had coerced Black Americans into the “universal status of consumer,” provided the basis for modes of coordinated economic action through which racialized asymmetries of power could ultimately be negated.91

Cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual aid were indeed factors in the community’s endurance. The Aberdeen Gardens Association, which opened its doors in November 1938, was a member-governed consumers’ cooperative that residents elected to form for the collective purchase of staple goods.92 The operation was funded with an initial $2,000 federal loan and residents were offered membership at a cost of $5. White backlash soon followed the public announcement of its formation, with local merchants alleging that the enterprise “would be operated in direct competition to legitimate retail stores.”93 Nevertheless, within a year, the success of the collectively-run store would lead the development to be recognized as a “model cooperative community.”94 A 1939 article in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* observed,

Cooperative living and sharing at the project is demonstrated in the maintenance of a cooperative store owned and operated by stockholders. . . . Today Aberdeen

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94 “Aberdeen Is Now Model Cooperative Community.”
Gardens has belied its detractors. The families are loud in their praise for the cooperative way of living. They are raising poultry and hogs and harvesting a variety of vegetables, and buying through their cooperative store, thus cutting down the budget for food.95

Moreover, reports indicate that the Aberdeen Gardens Association was imbricated within a wider network of regional Black cooperatives, including Red Circle Cooperative Association in Richmond, Virginia. Jessica Gordon-Nembhard asserts that these interconnected cooperative networks were critical in assisting “subaltern populations [to] gain economic independence, especially in the face of racial segregation, racial discrimination, and market failure.”96 As an instrument for the collective reappropriation of economic surplus (i.e., profit), cooperative organization within Aberdeen Gardens fostered community bonds, reduced household expenditures, and measurably strengthened residents’ financial hold on their homes, transmuting cost-savings into home equity. By 1939, a federal report noted that Aberdeen Gardens had the lowest rate of loan defaults among 12 New Deal homesteads in the region—a total comprising less than one percent.97

Nevertheless, in many ways, the Depression-era development of Aberdeen Gardens represents a line of flight not fully realized. The premature curtailment of the subsistence homestead program in 1935 and the scuttling of 29 other Black-led developments rendered the agrarian community an outlier in both its planning and type even before construction had commenced. By the time of the nominal conclusion of the New Deal in 1939, the unrepeated federal experiment persisted as the only New Deal housing development designed by Black architects and engineers, overseen by a Black

95 “Aberdeen Is Now Model Cooperative Community.”
construction supervisor, and built entirely by Black relief laborers. Transcending the paternalistic vision of “racial uplift” offered by both federal officials and Hampton’s white leadership, Aberdeen Gardens became a place of collective resistance to the Southern plantation economy and its vestiges. In the face of unrelenting white opposition, residents formed durable networks for the purpose of cooperative organization, mutual aid, and self-defense.

In total, 158 units were constructed at an average cost of $8,515 each, with individual homes then sold to families for between $1,800 and $2,600. This unusual episode of federal investment in Black homeownership demonstrated what Black communities throughout the United States already knew—that they stood to benefit equally, and often much more, than their white counterparts when given a chance to participate in the new mortgage-based economy. That the model development was never replicated suggests that its success was in fact regarded as a formidable threat to the preservation of white property regimes, a sentiment perhaps best reflected in the hand-wringing of its detractors. Segregationist and housing authority chairman Thomas J. Hundley seethed in 1939, “God grant there may never be another Aberdeen. . . . The local commission is trying to avoid the mistakes made in [that] colossal failure.” Although the Federal Housing Administration would later engineer extractive, race-based lending practices targeted at Black homebuyers, Aberdeen Gardens gestures ambivalently toward foreclosed hopes for a different idea of housing altogether—one circumscribed by a racial economy of value but which held space for the possibility of plotting a shared escape.

98 Patterson, “A New Pattern of Life”; Conkin, Tomorrow a New World.
Fig. 2.1. Plot plan, Aberdeen Gardens, Hampton, Virginia, 1935. Farm Security Administration, Cartographic and Architectural Records Division, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
Fig. 2.2. Elevations, Aberdeen Gardens, Hampton, Virginia, 1935. Farm Security Administration, Cartographic and Architectural Records Division, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
Fig. 2.3. Floor plans and section, Aberdeen Gardens, Hampton, Virginia, 1935. Farm Security Administration, Cartographic and Architectural Records Division, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
Fig. 2.4. Engineers and draftsmen, Aberdeen Gardens, Hampton, Virginia, 1936. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 2.5. Construction, Aberdeen Gardens, Hampton, Virginia, 1936. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 2.6. Construction, Aberdeen Gardens, Hampton, Virginia, 1936. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 2.7. Community manager William R. Walker Jr. with applicant, Aberdeen Gardens, Hampton, Virginia, 1937. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 2.8. Residents with completed homes, Aberdeen Gardens, Hampton, Virginia, 1937. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
CHAPTER THREE

Enclosing a White “Utopia” in Suburban Maryland

No soviet of technocrats would do more than exploit colored labor in order to raise the status of whites. No revolt of a white proletariat could be started if its object was to make black workers their economic, political and social equals. It is for this reason that American socialism for fifty years has been dumb on the Negro problem, and the communists cannot even get a respectful hearing in America unless they begin by expelling Negroes.

Life in Greenbelt is no accident. It is the result of foresight, careful planning, and engineering skill. . . . Democracy is at work and its influence is felt in Greenbelt. Here economic resources have served the general welfare beautifully.
—Greenbelt Cooperator, “Greenbelt: We Make Our Bow”

In a September 1936 pamphlet succinctly titled Greenbelt Towns, representatives of the newly minted Resettlement Administration touted their grand vision for the future of suburban development in the United States. The flagship prototype, a rural-industrial garden city in the eponymous municipality of Greenbelt, Maryland, would be completed the following year as one of three affiliated demonstration projects constructed across the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest. Invoking the pastoral imagery of a Jeffersonian idyll, the publication included photographs of white families gazing out upon an orderly landscape accompanied by the pronouncement, “Room to live in.”¹ The Lockean ideology of improvement, federally codified in the Homestead Act of 1862 and renewed through the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, was further taken as a point of departure in the founding issue of the town newspaper, The Greenbelt Cooperator, the following year.²

The publication proclaimed,

We did not arrive in Greenbelt after long, tiresome miles by covered wagon; nor did we find this place by chance. We were not first to gaze upon this spot of ground; nor did we cut down trees in order to build our homes. Nor is it necessary to clear the land to plant our crops, that we may eat; nor dig a well, that we may quench our thirst. Yet, we are pioneers—of a new way of living!1

Emblematic of the technocratic repertoire of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) that had gained political clout in the 1930s, Greenbelt transfigured the centuries-old doctrine of territorial expansion into one of organization and management of the national domain—a high-modernist reimagining of the ostensibly inevitable movement of history toward social and economic advancement.

Conspicuously absent from either description of the model community, however, was any direct reference to race, let alone the Jim Crow system that the publicly-financed Greenbelt Towns would geographically extend into formerly undeveloped regions of the nation’s urban periphery. Although the development relied upon the cheap labor of Black relief workers as part of the segregated workforce that participated in its construction, continuous with Depression-era protocols previously established in the federal construction of so-called “sundown towns,” Greenbelt strictly excluded non-white occupants through carefully orchestrated administrative procedures. A 1937 article in the Baltimore-based newspaper *The Afro-American* noted that 90 percent of the 1200 construction laborers employed on the project were Black and, of these, only two were classified as “skilled.”4 Moreover, the relief labor program continued a practice of labor segmentation rehearsed in Southern public works projects, wherein the tethering of race to landscape reinforced “associations of Black bodies with agricultural and infrastructural

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production.” As historian Joseph H. Arnold writes, “the [Resettlement Administration’s] statement that the employees constructing the greenbelt towns are ‘prospective tenants’ must have rung with familiar hollowness to the many Negroes who helped build these towns.” A 1944 study of the completed community later noted,

There are some Negro workers who do mostly janitorial and similar jobs in Greenbelt. They are not allowed to reside in the town. They are at the bottom of the status hierarchy. They are not greeted by housewives like some of the white service workers. They have the worst jobs, the least pay, and no deference is paid [to] them. They are isolated at work and even at lunch time.

Race thus occupied a seemingly paradoxical place within the all-white enclave: it was at once central to building, maintaining, and constituting the experimental suburb yet was simultaneously rendered virtually invisible in the town’s everyday operations—acknowledged only upon the skin of racialized workers whose structurally subservient employment positions required polite acquiescence to the town’s white residents.

The case of Greenbelt nevertheless troubles any simplistic analysis of the relationship between race and property in the interwar United States. As a federally-funded, proto-suburban housing development that eschewed ownership in favor of tenancy, the model community belongs to a period in which, as architectural historian Charles L. Davis II asserts, “public housing was [still] white.” Concurrent developments such as William Lescaze’s Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn, supervised by the Public Works Administration, further exemplify this momentary flirtation with British and

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German models of public housing as mechanisms for the consolidation of white working-class identity in the United States. Devoid of the explicit “racial naturalism” that had driven nineteenth-century preoccupations with architectural style, these projects embodied a new form of “racial historicism” that sublated ideas of race into a political teleology of modernism associated with “inventiveness, rationality, practicality, and a will to improve and progress.” Attributes discursively yoked to whiteness were thus recast in the deracinated language of Enlightenment universality. This idiom proved entirely commensurate with the ambitions of liberal reformers at the Resettlement Administration, where federal provisions for residential segregation, though purportedly unpopular, were willingly embraced as a matter of realpolitik. That officials could privately disavow the color line while simultaneously expanding its reach points to the polymorphous hold of whiteness as a network of techniques operative in organizing the built environment.

How, then, are we to speak of this evasive, multivalent formation with any real precision? To talk about whiteness is to assign a name to that which resists disclosure—a force that derives its power from appearing unmarked. As architectural historian Bryan Norwood notes, “Whiteness works through elision, by leaping over and beyond its own historical contingency to assert an assumed naturalness.” Likewise, in the words of historian David R. Roediger, to ignore whiteness is to “redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it.”

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10 Arnold, The New Deal in the Suburbs.
Greenbelt, where scholarly accounts relegate the fact of racial segregation to a historical footnote hardly worthy of any serious interrogation. An aura of wistful reverence tinges decades of retrospective architecture and planning literature on the Greenbelt Town Program, which for those committed to a hagiographic refashioning of the RPAA, represented merely a thwarted opportunity for broad-based public housing development in the United States.\(^{13}\) That Greenbelt actively participated in state-sanctioned processes of racialization by working to define that unstable category, whiteness, in relation to a marked and dispossessed “other” has largely persisted unexamined. Moreover, the ease with which the anti-urbanist, “Fabian Socialis[m]” of the RPAA was integrated into the predominant logics of American racial capitalism endures as a topic worthy of sustained consideration.\(^{14}\)

Embedded within the experiment was an animating philosophy of environmental determinism, in which it was held that the design of living environments could induce virtuous characteristics and suppress undesirable behaviors among inhabitants. Rooted in nineteenth-century race science and evolutionary biology, the reformative potentials of design for social engineering had been eagerly adopted by leading architecture and planning professionals throughout Europe and the Americas in the early decades of the twentieth century.\(^{15}\) In tandem with the convergent interwar influences of architectural modernism and the ebbing Progressive movement, the United States federal government began to “commission documentary surveys of urban poverty to provide an empirical


\(^{14}\) Sussman, *Planning the Fourth Migration*, 23.

baseline for assessing the social problems generated by contemporary urban living conditions.”

Initiatives to redesign domestic environments for social and racial betterment soon flourished under the New Deal, during which unprecedented federal investments in residential construction were newly combined with racial covenants, land use restrictions, and discriminatory mortgage-lending and tenant selection policies. The irony here should be noted: whiteness was, on one hand, regarded as a natural, static, and even self-evident category, while on the other, it was believed that it must be proactively cultivated and preemptively guarded from the supposedly deleterious influences of both racial intermixing and unharmonious urban conditions.

Drawing upon a range of scholarship sparked by W. E. B. Du Bois and loosely assembled under the heading of critical whiteness studies, this chapter attempts to track whiteness across various forms as it was spatially and materially elaborated in the construction of the suburban Maryland community. I argue that boundaries, both physical and discursive, were central to Greenbelt’s coherence, producing a series of racialized enclosures wherein “an exclusive, partial commonwealth” could be nurtured. Structured by an interior-exterior dichotomy, the garden city afforded a space of bucolic separation in which residents would functionally trade upon their unmarked status as “a source of material, psychological, affective, and libidinal” gratification. Simultaneously, the racially-coded specter of urban affliction worked to delineate between those for whom the capital-intensive leisure landscape was secured and those against whom its barriers were erected. Accordingly, Greenbelt’s defensive framework for the production and

16 Davis, Building Character, 180.
18 Myers, The Gratification of Whiteness, 79.
fortification of whiteness could be read at multiple registers, from urban and architectural scales to that of the individual body.

This chapter begins by recounting a brief history of Greenbelt, tracing the origins of the garden city experiment from the writings of the British autodidact Ebenezer Howard through the early residential prototypes of the upstart RPAA and, finally, the idea’s embrace by the Resettlement Administration under the leadership of economist Rexford G. Tugwell. It then proceeds to situate the construction of the suburban community and its attendant politics of race within the context of the Great Migration and the federal program of slum containment in neighboring Washington, D.C. The development of the all-Black Langston Terrace Dwellings, located just 10 miles away and designated a “rival” housing project by The Washington Post in 1935, presents an illuminating glimpse into the emergent “racial binarism” in which Greenbelt participated.19 Additionally, W. E. B. Du Bois’ contemporaneous critique of the Depression-era white labor movement and the “psychological wage” conferred by whiteness affords a lens through which to analyze the persistence of property relations in the utopian socialist-inspired community. The chapter concludes with a coda on the shuttering of the Greenbelt Town Program and the project’s subsequent legacy in postwar suburban development.

**The Greenbelt Town Program**

The Greenbelt Town Program was initially conceived as part of a suite of New Deal investments in the nation’s housing infrastructure during a period of protracted economic crisis and urban migration. Confronted with surplus labor, surplus land, surplus

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industrial capacity, and a deteriorating housing stock, a host of newly empowered federal agencies were charged with facilitating residential construction projects through which to direct state subsidies. Among these, the Resettlement Administration, headed by former Columbia University professor Rexford G. Tugwell, was arguably awarded the greatest degree of latitude in executing its mandate. As enumerated in the text of Emergency Order 7027 issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935, the jurisdiction of the Resettlement Administration was threefold: to administer resettlement projects for low-income families from rural and urban areas; to advance resource management practices in regions where land had been exhausted of economic value; and to authorize loans for agricultural workers. The agency’s wide-reaching responsibilities would be unfavorably characterized as ranging “from buying a mule for a farmer to building houses for industrial workers; from establishing game preserves to encouraging formation of co-operative organizations to can beans.”

Even so, internal communications by Resettlement Administration staff acknowledged that Tugwell “stretched the notion of ‘rural rehabilitation’ quite far” when he approved plans for the suburban development of Greenbelt and three associated communities in 1935. Scaled down from an initial proposal for 25 garden city prototypes, three would ultimately be completed for a total of $36,000,000 allocated from the Federal Emergency Relief Act. (Greenbrook, originally slated for construction in the

21 Arnold, The New Deal in the Suburbs.
23 Box 13, Consumers Cooperative, General Records of the Housing and Home Finance Agency: Case Files, Subject Files, Audit Reports, and Other Records Relating to Housing Projects, 1934–1946, The National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
24 Conkin, Tomorrow a New World.
New York City suburb of Bound Brook, New Jersey, was blocked by court injunction in 1936. Moreover, departing from the Resettlement Administration’s original directive, tenants of the white-collar bedroom community of Greenbelt would be neither low-income nor displaced workers; most would be the families of public sector employees commuting to nearby offices in Washington, D.C.

As the largest of these developments and the first to accept tenants, Greenbelt attracted the greatest public criticism. Lines of conservative attack largely focused upon the allegedly exorbitant use of federal dollars, the program’s associations with European-style centralized planning, and the resident composition of the model community.25 Perhaps predictably, rightwing outrage and journalistic red-baiting immediately followed the announcement of the contentious federal projects. In a series of reproachful articles titled “Utopia Unlimited” published in the Washington Post in February 1936, conservative critic Felix Bruner scrutinized the finances of the Greenbelt Town Program and derided the initiative as a communist ploy. Condemning the expansive authority vested in the Resettlement Administration, Bruner alleged that Tugwell had been delegated “almost every power . . . except the power to declare war.”26 Similarly provocative headlines circulated in regional newspapers reading “First Communist Towns in America Near Completion” and “Tugwell Abolishes Private Property.”27

Spurred by a wave of negative press, the US Senate authorized a special committee to investigate the actions of the Resettlement Administration in May of 1936. Having garnered the critical public support of allied federal officials, architecture and planning

25 Bruner, “Utopia Unlimited.”
26 Bruner, “Utopia Unlimited.”
professionals, and white labor unions represented by the American Federation of Labor, however, the projects proceeded.  

Reactionary hand-wringing did not preclude more sober critiques. The fast-tracking of the collectivist experiments ironically lent credence to a warning offered by W. E. B. Du Bois on the eve of the New Deal. Remarking upon the limits confronted by American socialism in the midst of the historic economic downturn, he observed that the chauvinism of white labor organizers eager to secure gains for their constituencies threatened to derail any prospects for interracial cooperation. The all-white American Federation of Labor, to whom lucrative construction contracts would be awarded for the Greenbelt Town Program, could “succeed in their narrow project and still leave the great mass of the working population not only unorganized, but racially distinct.” Writing in the pages of The Crisis in 1933, he noted,

White labor is too frightened at Negro competition to attempt united action. . . . The reformist program of Socialism meets no response from the white proletariat because it offers no escape to wealth and no effective bar to black labor, and a mud-sill of black labor is essential to white labor's standard of living. . . . Race antagonism and labor group rivalry is still undisturbed by world catastrophe.

Du Bois’ admonition, it seems, was reinterpreted as strategy. Political pragmatism ostensibly prevailed in the decision to uphold racial segregation in the communities of Greenbelt, Greenhills, and Greendale, with Resettlement Administration officials commenting that “there was no support for integration” and they had already generated “controversy enough.” Determined to ensure the projects’ realization and not alienate
their base of support, administrators concluded that the allocation of federal funds would be permissible insofar as the projects did not transgress the color line.

Eschewing the overt racism of the Jim Crow South, Greenbelt instead buried its segregationist policies within unwritten administrative procedures while invoking an amorphous urban threat from which it offered sanctuary. The morphology underlying the community, first proposed by Ebenezer Howard in 1898, gained currency at a moment of heightened fear for the contaminating effects of disease, suffering, and crime attributed to American city centers. As architectural historian Fabiola López-Durán reflects, “The so-called garden city, a new urban model of decentralization conceived to combat both the ill health of modern metropolises and the abandonment of rural territories, was an early synthesis of what Lamarckian eugenics would soon bring together: the complicity of medicine, morality, and architecture.”32 By eradicating the environmental maladies attributed to urban existence, planners believed that a more economically productive national citizenry might be cultivated, “increas[ing] at once the activity and industry of the tenant, the productivity of the soil, and the rent which the tenant would be willing to pay.”33 Here, the coupling of health and productive capacity imbued each with a moral dimension and subjected both to the purview of state administration. Simultaneously, the salutary benefits of nature encoded racial metaphors of cleanliness, purity, and order that served to rhetorically structure the garden city, a feature that proved well-suited to the apartheid conditions of the interwar United States.34

32 López-Durán, _Eugenics in the Garden_, 55.
33 Ebenezer Howard, _Garden Cities of To-morrow_ (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1902), 34.
Greenbelt was not the first attempt at adapting Howard’s utopian socialist proposal for the North American continent, though it would be the most ambitious to date. Following the demonstration of selected garden city planning principles by the RPAA in the private development of Radburn beginning in 1928, federal officials looked to the project as a replicable model for automobile-oriented, suburban housing. The Fairlawn, New Jersey neighborhood—designed by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright and championed by their influential advocacy group—was organized around five core elements that would come to be known as the “Radburn Idea.” These consisted of roads differentiated by use, separation of pedestrian and vehicle traffic, garden-facing homes, a green belt region buffering the development, and blocks grouped in clusters. Furthermore, Howard’s economic model was altered, with neither agricultural or industrial production located within Radburn’s boundaries. Instead, the neighborhood was designed as an economically-dependent, residential satellite community primarily marketed toward New York City office workers.

Federal adoption of the “Radburn Idea” initially appeared improbable even as a chorus of sympathetic architecture and planning professionals praised its innovations. Built in the midst of the 1929 stock market crash, Radburn was hardly a success for investors, nor was it ever even fully completed. The City Housing Corporation, which financed the project, declared bankruptcy in 1934 after the company’s land holdings precipitously depreciated and a critical mass of homebuyers defaulted on their mortgages. The prospect of “continuous, large-scale development” that the garden city’s financial stability was premised upon proved to be elusive. Buoyed by the entry of the federal

government into the arena of home mortgage insurance in June of 1934, however, administrators became newly bullish on the concept’s potential applications. Perhaps equally significant, Radburn demonstrated the possibility of incorporating European modernist planning principles within a distinctly American architectural vernacular, rendering the scalable model for mass-produced housing more palatable to would-be conservative detractors. As Charles L. Davis II notes of the RPAA and its vocal supporters, “[Lewis] Mumford, [Catherine] Bauer, and Clarence Stein were among the most prominent figures to assuage . . . conservative fears by theorizing the possibility of a homegrown system for regulating public housing that organically emerged from the social values and economic basis of American democracy.”

Completed in September 1938, the community of Greenbelt was a direct successor of Radburn and regarded as the truest approximation of garden city planning principles in the United States. The 885-unit development—comprising apartment buildings, row houses, and prefabricated single-family homes—was located on a 3,600-acre tract of submarginal land adjacent to the National Agricultural Research Center. Echoing Howard’s original rationale, the site in Prince George’s County, Maryland was hand chosen by Tugwell to show “the advantage of locating in suburban areas where land prices are lower.” The town itself occupied only a small footprint, approximately 217 acres, with the remainder of the allotment designated for parks, gardens, woodland, and areas reserved for future expansion. Additionally, the five elements of the “Radburn Idea” found new expression in Greenbelt in conjunction with

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37 Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World.*
38 Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs,* 60.
unique variations added by Resettlement Administration officials, including a
crescent-shaped configuration organizing the curvilinear superblocks. Likewise, a 25-acre
artificial lake was constructed just east of the settlement, a massive undertaking intended
simultaneously to compensate for the low-lying elevation of the landscape and to satisfy
a federal mandate to provide work for “unskilled” relief laborers.39 The unadorned
exterior design of the flat-roofed dwellings, gesturing toward the nascent International
Style, also reflected constraints on “skilled” labor.

In addition to the modern accommodations provided in each residence, tenants
were afforded access to requisite utilities infrastructure and numerous
publicly-administered, cooperative amenities. A school, community center, and various
retail operations allowed the garden city to function as a self-contained municipality. The
nested organization of the community was conceived as follows:

Neighborhoods . . . organized around superblocks large enough to contain an
interior green [were] penetrated at the edge by houses on cul-de-sacs. Pedestrian
paths, made continuous with road underpasses, would crisscross the green and
become the chief network of the circulation, while also separating children from
the dangers of automobile traffic. All these structures would together make a
neighborhood unit, limited in size by comfortable walking distance and organized
around a school. Several neighborhood units would make up a town with public
spaces, institutions and cooperative systems for housework, shopping and child
care.40

Likewise, the architecture itself projected the ideological leanings of the prototype
community, with nationalist and labor iconography chiseled in prominent bas-reliefs. As
narrated by architectural historian Keller Easterling and film scholar Richard Prelinger,

39 Arnold, The New Deal in the Suburbs, 111.
40 Call It Home: The House That Private Enterprise Built, produced by Keller Easterling and Richard
Prelinger (The Voyager Company, 1992).
“Public buildings like the shopping center at Greenbelt . . . were gleaming white structures similar to many [Works Progress Administration] projects of the period in that they hybridized sturdy American proportions with heroic imagery of the worker.”41 At once innovative, optimistic, and exclusionary, the insular model community offered a repeatable formula for public housing development in the American suburbs, albeit one crucially subsidized by the continued flow of federal relief money.

The Garden Beyond the Slum

Just ten miles from Greenbelt in the nation’s capital, the Public Works Administration broke ground on the Langston Terrace Dwellings in 1936. Spearheaded by architects Hilyard R. Robinson and Paul R. Williams, the modernist apartment block, which bore discernible resemblance to the social housing of New Frankfurt, was conceived as a slum abatement project intended to accommodate 275 working-class, Black families from the city’s Northwest and Southwest quadrants.42 The preceding decades had brought a sizable influx of Black migrants to the city—who, by 1930, accounted for approximately one-third of the capital’s population—and the pronounced economic crisis had exacerbated existing conditions of poverty in the poorest neighborhoods. Moreover, racially exclusionary zoning and land use controls were enacted during this period as a direct response to the arrival of Black Southerners during the Great Migration.43 Indicative of its surreptitious function in the defense of racial regimes of ownership, the act of zoning was legally justified in 1926 as an extension of

41 Call It Home.
the state’s power to police property. That same year, the United States Supreme Court also upheld the legality of racially exclusive covenants in *Corrigan v. Buckley.*

Consequently, as historian Sandra R. Heard notes, Washington, D.C.’s Black residents were “corralled together” during the Great Depression in a “rundown” area “bordered by the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, the Mall, and South Capitol Street. . . . In many cases, the housing stock they inhabited was inferior and more expensive than the dwellings that were sold or rented to the city’s white residents.” The resulting forms of improvised settlement, typically built in narrow street alleys, were characterized by overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and a lack of access to plumbing and electricity.

The district’s informal alleyway dwellings had been the subject of a sociological survey conducted by Robinson, leading him, even before the passage of the National Housing Act in 1934, to call for the amelioration of Washington, D.C.’s social ills through a program of public housing construction. Using photography and a range of quantitative metrics inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois’ seminal 1899 publication, *The Philadelphia Negro,* Robinson ultimately documented the living environments of 225 families. In a 1932 interview, he summarized his observations to a reporter at *The Afro-American:* “Our slums are without any semblance of picturesque charm, [they] are populated with a large number of very poor colored people, and a few white people. . . . It is a place to escape if insomnia or disease does not overtake the inhabitants.”

Furthermore, Robinson implored that the remedy for the ailment presented by the city’s slums would be to “convert alley hovels into European-style villages,” which he

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44 Oberly and Reece, “Planning History From the Lions’ Perspective.”
47 *Afro-American,* “Europe’s Alleys Unlike Ours,” October 8, 1932.
suggested would be conducive to promoting industrious activity and respectable conduct among residents.\textsuperscript{48} The racialized composition of Washington, D.C.’s alley dwellings was already colloquially well known, even if understudied; an article in the same newspaper later confirmed bluntly, “Alley dwellers in the national capital are colored folk.”\textsuperscript{49} Nevertheless, the meticulously executed survey commanded the attention of federal officials, who shortly thereafter appointed Robinson to the District of Columbia Advisory Committee on Sites for Public Housing Projects under the Public Works Administration.\textsuperscript{50} By the fall of 1935, the agency acquired vacant parcels for a development overlooking the Anacostia River, affording the up-and-coming Robinson an opportunity to demonstrate his vision.

Completed in May of 1938, the Langston Terrace Dwellings was lauded for its inventive interpretation of the Public Works Administration’s housing construction guidelines as well as its incorporation of modernist design principles. These included the efficiency of unit configurations, the generous use of natural lighting, and the prominence afforded to a central courtyard and surrounding open space. For many of the residents who had recently migrated from the rural South, the landscaped areas also helped “to ease the transition to urbanism with the promise of plots for productive gardens.”\textsuperscript{51} New Yorker architecture critic Lewis Mumford remarked approvingly of the development in 1938,

Closer to Mason and Dixon’s line, the PWA apartments in Washington, D.C. . . . set a high standard of exterior design, and the use of sculpture against the flat walls of the building is more conspicuously successful here than anywhere else I

\textsuperscript{48} Heard, “Making Slums and Suburbia in Black Washington During the Great Depression,” 9.
\textsuperscript{49} "Alley Dwellers," \textit{Afro-American}, July 24, 1937.
\textsuperscript{50} Quinn, “Making Modern Homes.”
\textsuperscript{51} Quinn, “Making Modern Homes,” 129.
can recall; from the photographs, it looks better than the best modern work in a Hamburg or Vienna that I can recall.\textsuperscript{52}

Likewise, the development received praise in the journal \textit{Opportunity} for prioritizing “Negro participation” in its “planning and execution,” with Housing Division Consultant Robert C. Weaver writing that it was “not only designed by Negro architects, but its construction was supervised . . . by colored engineers.”\textsuperscript{53} As his first large-scale commission, Robinson reportedly attempted to reside at the completed development but was repeatedly denied, later recounting, “My reason for wanting to live [there] then was so that whatever mistakes, bad choices, and omissions I had made as Architect for the Project, I would have to live with them . . . suffer them.”\textsuperscript{54} The final cost of the project totaled $1,810,767, amounting to a per unit expenditure of approximately one-third that of Greenbelt in spite of the premium expended for its central urban real estate.

Still, the liberal assimilative framework of inclusion embodied by the Langston Terrace Dwellings was not incompatible with the entrenchment of racial categorization and the attendant reproduction of class- and race-based hierarchies. The uneasy relationship between the two competing public housing developments revealed ways in which they actively participated in state-sanctioned processes of racialization even as they modeled acceptable avenues for “Negro participation” in the New Deal’s program of public housing construction—in Greenbelt as “unskilled” relief laborers and in the Langston Terrace Dwellings as architects, engineers, and residents. In practice, the siting of the Langston Terrace Dwellings was invoked in defense of Greenbelt’s segregation,

\textsuperscript{54} Hilyard R. Robinson, “Langston Project 40th Anniversary Program,” September 24, 1977, Hilyard R. Robinson Collection, Manuscripts Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
with a researcher of the tenant selection process remarking in 1938 that Black families “were not admitted [to Greenbelt] as residents, since they have their own low cost housing project in Northeast Washington.” Recognizing the growing stigma associated with city-living and the unequal allocation of municipal resources afforded to predominantly Black neighborhoods, some Black residents remained determined to escape urban poverty by fleeing to the leafy suburbs. Washington, D.C. residents such as Selma Thomas, who wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt petitioning for approval to rent a “little home” in the “paradise” of Greenbelt, were turned away without recourse.

In parallel, the grouping of European-Americans within a purpose-built, segregated community encouraged the consolidation of white racial identity. Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson notes that the emergent “racial binarism” of the New Deal period “reflected the nationalization of the race questions that had characterized the South for generations.” This concept hints at the duality of white racialization as it operated to demarcate the supposedly innate, biological boundaries of a heterogeneous immigrant population whose socially constructed composition was continually shifting. What were previously considered distinct European ethnicities at the turn of the twentieth century were soon assimilated under the monolithic umbrella of whiteness as the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 imposed quotas severely restricting international immigration. Simultaneously, Black Southerners, who had increasingly fled to the urban and industrialized North, provided a presence against which whiteness could define itself. Accordingly, whiteness was reciprocally constituted in opposition to the phantasm of Blackness—a phenomenon which had long dominated Southern life but which expanded

55 Arnold, The New Deal in the Suburbs, 143.
57 Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color, 114.
its geographic reach throughout the United States in reaction to the Great Migration. Critically, this statutory recognition of a racial binary was formalized in and through federal housing construction.

The diffusion of the color line was spatialized in Greenbelt as citydwellers retreated from the specter of an advancing slum. The garden city leveraged both a white, middle-class longing for the material comforts of urban modernity and a deep “ambivalence and even antipathy for city life.”\(^\text{58}\) Principal to mediating this dual imperative was the 3,400-acre protective belt of vegetation and agricultural land that surrounded the community, preventing the encroachment of industrial urbanity from the neighboring metropolis of Washington, D.C.\(^\text{59}\) The menacing vision of urban existence opportunistically propagated by the Resettlement Administration, though noticeably absent of any explicit mention of race, served to underscore the practical utility of the forested region. A 1936 publication promoting the Greenbelt Town Program notes,

> The public evils, social and economic, of such conditions are unquestioned and unquestionable. Slums are the breeding places of disease which take toll, not only from denizens, but by spread, from the inhabitants of the entire city and state. Juvenile delinquency, crime, and immorality are born there, find protection, and flourish.\(^\text{60}\)

The discursive annulment of an exterior as a zone of abjection produced the conditions upon which an interior could derive its stability. Within Greenbelt, residents were safely fortified inside a densely wooded enclosure, a land reserve intended to “protect the town forever from overcrowding and undesirable building.”\(^\text{61}\) The presence of a natural transition region evoked a cordon sanitaire for the purpose of cleansing, purification, and

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\(^\text{59}\) Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*.
\(^\text{60}\) The Resettlement Administration, *Greenbelt Towns*.
\(^\text{61}\) The Resettlement Administration, *Greenbelt Towns*.
decontamination. Moreover, the physical barrier allowed the differential administration of populations, with the pastoral landscape the sole preserve of those admitted to reside within its boundaries. Here, banal physical elements connoting leisure, seclusion, and conservation were enlisted in the design of a perimeter that effectively regulated both movement and vision.

**White Wages, Sovereign Bodies**

The selection of tenants to inhabit the model community of Greenbelt was methodically undertaken to ensure that the experiment would appear successful to the public and private industry alike. At the same time, officials sought to assuage Prince George’s County residents’ fears that Greenbelt “would be populated by undesirable slum dwellers.”\(^{62}\) Administrative protocols devised to select those families best approximating a white, middle-class ideal shaped vectors of racialization even as they concealed the operations of race within the screening process. Determined to demonstrate the viability of their “outstanding physical environment,” federal administrators contrived their own criteria to parse over 5,700 applications for the 885 units.\(^ {63}\) While initially conceived as housing for “low-income” residents, salary requirements soon shifted to favor those of “moderate income.”\(^ {64}\) Reports indicate the process was influenced by anxieties for “families which might detract from the . . . wholesome, solid, and stable community,” with particular concerns for uncleanliness, disagreeableness of “social attitudes,” and “questionable” family arrangements—notably, those which did not correspond with the heteropatriarchal norms of the nuclear family structure.\(^ {65}\) For families who passed initial

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\(^{62}\) Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 140.


\(^{64}\) Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 138–139.

\(^{65}\) Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 141.
scrutiny and an interview by a five-person committee, the selection process culminated in a physical examination of each prospective tenant conducted by a social worker. Ultimately, two-thirds of those families selected were headed by public sector employees and the range of self-reported political affiliations represented spanned “socialism to laissez faire capitalism.” Although original records of the determination procedure have not survived, evidence suggests that the only stringent rule was a prohibition against Black applicants.

If the New Deal permitted the provision of a Keynesian social wage via the home, then its racialized allocation gestured toward the libidinal economy of whiteness first theorized by Du Bois in 1935. In his magnum opus, Black Reconstruction—often interpreted as a thinly-veiled allegory for the New Deal period—Du Bois articulated the “psychological” function of the “deference” shown to white Southern workers in the aftermath of emancipation.

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers . . . were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. . . . Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them.66

The decision of workers “to define themselves by their whiteness” demonstrably resulted in tangible short-term gains, sometimes in monetary terms.67 However, Du Bois’ “brilliant, indispensable formulation” was that “even when they ‘received a low wage [they were] compensated in part by a . . . public and psychological wage’”—another type

67 Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 12.
of remuneration that imparted special social standing.\textsuperscript{68} This tendency to identify with other whites on the basis of race rather than with other workers on the basis of class explained for Du Bois why the country had so consistently defied any “theory of labor class unity.”\textsuperscript{69}

Inside the garden city development of Greenbelt, the manicured landscape successively legitimated, sublimated, and concealed the conferral of a white wage. Absent fenced parcels or provisions for individual homeownership, proprietary forms nevertheless persisted. Possession in the segregated community was articulated not through an individual title to the land or a deed to a home, but rather through a “right to use” and a “right to exclude”—legal entitlements that structured tenants’ access to a racially demarcated commons.\textsuperscript{70} Residents picnicked on verdant lawns, hammocked in shaded groves, and waded in the artificial lake while pedestrians pushed strollers along grass-covered underpasses, insulated from the fast-moving vehicle traffic of busy thoroughfares. Left unspoken was the racial schema upon which these property rights were exercised. Legal scholar Cheryl I. Harris asserts the slippages attendant to the relationship between whiteness and property, two parallel constructions that trace their juridical entanglement to seventeenth-century America. Expanding upon traditional conceptions of property law, which include “the exclusive rights of use, disposition, and possession,” Harris explains: “The right to exclude was the central principle, too, of whiteness as identity, for mainly whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be ‘not white.’”\textsuperscript{71}

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\textsuperscript{68} Roediger, \textit{The Wages of Whiteness}, 12.
\textsuperscript{69} Myers, \textit{The Gratification of Whiteness}, 19.
\textsuperscript{71} Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1736.
\end{flushleft}
Accordingly, whiteness, a property interest conferring the possessor with privileges of exclusivity, was naturalized in and through the green-laden landscape.

Frequently pictured by Farm Security Administration photographers as another symbol of Greenbelt and its forward-looking tenants, the kitchen in each residence communicated virtues of tidiness, simplicity, efficiency, and productivity. Porcelain sinks and whitewashed walls provided the background against which an unencumbered vision of domesticity was staged, cleansed of any sentimental ornamentation that had adorned household interiors in prior decades. Photographs show pristine surfaces and tenants evidently at ease, effortlessly tending to household chores in stylish dress. Emulating the spirit of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky’s Frankfurt Kitchen, first showcased in 1926, the factory-like optimization of Greenbelt’s kitchen reflected principles of scientific management scrupulously applied to the reproductive sphere of the home.\(^72\) Likewise, mechanized appliances, including a range and refrigerator, promised liberation from the everyday drudgery of manual toil. (Other chores could be outsourced altogether, with laundry and dry-cleaning sent via delivery van to a private plant in nearby Washington, D.C.)\(^73\) In theory, if not in practice, the reorganization of the household interior would free Greenbelt’s residents of the so-called “servant problem”—a popular topic of middle-class exasperation featured in American lifestyle magazines during this period.\(^74\)

The incongruous image of a technologically emancipated domestic realm starkly contrasted with the racialized economy of household labor exacerbated by the cascading economic crisis. Unlike in Greenbelt, where spouses of employed men were prohibited


\(^{73}\) Form, “The Sociology of a White Collar Suburb.”

from waged work, many Black women in neighboring Washington, D.C. who faced employment discrimination during the Great Depression were thrust back into domestic worker positions from which they had previously escaped.75 According to the 1930 census, over 600,000 Black women labored as domestic workers in private households throughout the South and Mid-Atlantic—an equivalent of 53 percent of the Black female labor force.76 By 1940, this figure had increased to 60 percent. Additionally, a 1939 study by Clara Goldberg Schiffer of the Washington, D.C. Domestic Workers Union indicated that the city’s Black domestic workers commonly labored as many as 72 hours per week for an average pay of $7.32.77 This occupational disparity was reflected at the Langston Terrace Dwellings, where numerous female applicants indicated their vocation as “chambermaid,” “cook,” or “laundress.”78 Furthermore, New Deal labor reforms enacted under the National Recovery Administration classified domestic workers as “unskilled,” exempting them from minimum wage protections and structurally affirming their precarity and vulnerability to exploitation.79 Consequently, the broader spatial division of household labor exemplified by Greenbelt was made possible by laboring lives lived outside its confines.

Inside the bounded community, recreational infrastructure, including tennis courts, playgrounds, and bicycle paths, also dotted the landscape. These features operated

78 Quinn, “Making Modern Homes,” 66
as elements constitutive of the garden city’s prescribed regimen of health, safety, and physical wellbeing. A public service announcement in The Greenbelt Cooperator reads,

The refreshment of body and mind effectively defines the word recreation. To all residents of Greenbelt, whether they be six or sixty, there will be many varied recreational facilities at their disposal. . . . This is not an ordinary community, so let’s not forget the necessity of developing sound minds and bodies that will be synonymous with our progress.80 Accordingly, the heated outdoor pool at the center of the garden city provided an important space of congregation and communal activity. As a symbolic site for the formation of the body politic of the white suburb, the pool could be seen to destabilize boundaries between the individual and that of the collective, dissolving the barriers of each through a reciprocal immersion in and exchange of fluids. This intimate suspension of bodily separation—and the sexual association with orgiastic and excremental impulses—rendered public pools sites of elevated racial anxiety.81

As architectural historian Marta Gutman observes with regard to contemporaneously constructed pools funded by the Works Progress Administration,

Water fueled white racism. The practice of bathing had expanded to include swimming for exercise, but water retained the longstanding symbolic link with purity. Swimming pools became places where those seen as impure or polluted would be excluded (even though water had to be sanitized in order to be pure). When pressed to integrate, white operators protested pools would have to be emptied, scrubbed clean, and filled with fresh water after Black children swam in them.82

In instances when racial integration was implemented, gendered segregation often followed to “alleviate white fears of sexual mixing of the races.”83 Likewise, spikes in

80 “Recreation Program Advanced Here,” Greenbelt Cooperator, November 24, 1937.
81 “Bathers, Nude, Hold Orgy on Morgan Campus in Moonlight,” Afro-American, August 1, 1931.
83 Gutman, “Race, Place, and Play,” 553.
polio and tuberculosis transmission, thought to be aggravated by public bathing, represented a public health scourge in the Washington, D.C. region. As documented by historian Sandra R. Heard, *The Afro-American*, “reported that racially designated areas of the city, with a high concentration of alley dwellings, spread tuberculosis that compromised the health and prosperity of the city’s populace,” concluding that slums were “‘the capital’s tuberculosis sore spot[s].’” 84 Within the sanctity of the enclosed community of Greenbelt, however, photographs capture sunkissed swimmers mingling without apparent inhibition. Circumscribed by the white, middle-class polity of the Maryland suburb, imagined threats to the vitality of the social body—in the form of crime, poverty, sexual impropriety, and illness—were banished far beyond the garden city’s frontier.

**After Greenbelt**

By 1939, the Resettlement Administration had been dissolved and momentum for the Greenbelt Town program stalled. Hoping to salvage public enthusiasm for the costly prototype communities, Lewis Mumford and influential urban planner Catherine Bauer assisted in the production of a documentary film entitled *The City*. Financed by a $50,000 Carnegie Foundation grant and produced in association with the American Institute of Planners—a successor organization to the RPAA—the film depicts Greenbelt as a grassy reprieve from the “dirt, smoke, noise, [and] confusion” of “demoralizing slums.” 85 A voiceover penned by Mumford proclaims,

> Order has come—order and life together. We’ve got the skills, we found the way. We built the cities. All that we know about machines and soil and raw materials

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and human ways of living is waiting. We can reproduce the pattern and better it a thousand times. It’s here—the new city—ready to serve a better age. You and your children, the choice is yours.86

Accompanied by the triumphant score of composer Aaron Copland, the film presented a teleological vision of human settlement, with the movement from overcrowded cities to lush suburbs culminating in the embrace of the Greenbelt Town model. Notwithstanding its initially positive reception, the film’s progressive optimism struck a discordant note with the country’s evolving political climate.

Although a renewed wave of wartime construction brought additional military housing to the planned community beginning in 1941, this second burst of federal investment was short-lived. After the conclusion of the war, a drawdown in the civil service sector meant that many employees lost their jobs. Additionally, the popular association of the towns with Soviet-style settlements further undermined their standing among a conservative Congress, leading government property in the Greenbelt towns to be liquidated and sold to citizen groups. As Keller Easterling and Richard Prelinger note, “By 1943 these communities were ‘forced back into the traditional patterns of complete individual ownership, private enterprise, and local control.’”87 While the model of public ownership underlying the experimental development would not take root in the postwar American suburbs, the spatial lexicon of separation refined in Greenbelt would. The recuperation of the “Radburn Idea” within a postwar legislative environment gradually witnessed the transformation of its defining features in accordance with Federal Housing Administration policies: the superblock came to resemble Clarence Perry's “neighborhood unit,” the greenbelt in practice often functioned as an apartheid wall, and

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86 The City, directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke (American Institute of Planners, 1939).
87 Call It Home.
the cul-de-sac was optimized as an instrument of efficient subdivision and financial accumulation. Along with the discriminatory sale of single-family homes via Federal Housing Administration-backed mortgages, faintly recognizable traces of the Greenbelt Town program were disseminated throughout the segregated American suburbs. Within this vexed lineage, Greenbelt holds an unusual position as both an unrealized trajectory for public housing development and an unacknowledged laboratory of white racialization.

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Fig. 3.1. The “Radburn Idea,” Radburn, New Jersey, 1935. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 3.2. Relief workers clearing the land, Greenbelt, Maryland, 1935. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 3.3. Landscaping, Greenbelt, Maryland, 1939. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 3.4. Underpass, Greenbelt, Maryland, 1938. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 3.5. Alleyway housing, Washington, D.C., 1935. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 3.6. Construction, Langston Terrace Dwellings, Washington, D.C., 1937. Washington Star Photo Collection, District of Columbia Public Library, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 3.7. Move-in day, Langston Terrace Dwellings, Washington, D.C., 1937. Washington Star Photo Collection, District of Columbia Public Library, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 3.8. Aerial view, Greenbelt, Maryland, 1941. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 3.9. Kitchen interior, Greenbelt, Maryland, 1936. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 3.10. Swimming pool, Greenbelt, Maryland, 1939. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
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