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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Those "who have no interest in the soil": Poor Southern White People and Property in Antislavery Arguments for Homesteading

Lauren Crosser

Department of Sociology, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA
Email: laurencrosser@brandeis.edu

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Abstract

In the US, scholars have long argued that white people across class lines share a taken for granted interest in property. Yet in the antebellum period, as land was concentrated in the hands of a few slaveholders, southern nonslaveholding white people were largely unable to partake in land ownership. Only after the Civil War did many more white people benefit from "whiteness as property," in part through homesteading (free land), a policy strongly pushed for by antislavery elites – who argued for, in addition to freedom from slavery, white people's inherent interests in property. How do we explain what changed, and the specific ideology – that white people have an interest in property – which helped shape this policy? Using the case of the Homestead Act of 1862, I argue that antislavery elites articulated a property interest in whiteness. The Homestead Act is an example of struggles to articulate poor southern white peoples's ideal relationship to landed property, according to antislavery conceptions of middle-class farming and agrarian capitalism. I show articulation processes, as antislavery figures responded to white poverty in the South, resulting in arguments for free land for white people. I also show a shift in rhetoric among antislavery Republicans in the late 1850s and early 1860s, in which they expanded their framing of homesteading to include an emphasis on bringing poor white people into modernity and civilization compatible with the politics of scientific agriculture. This article complicates accounts of whiteness as property by tracing historically specific ideologies of whiteness and land in the south in the antebellum period.

Keywords: whiteness as property; Homestead Act; slavery and capitalism; nineteenth century land policy; homesteading and race; racial capitalism; racial articulation; racial ideology; scientific agriculture; United States Civil War

In the US, scholars have long argued that white people across class lines share an interest in property. Yet, in the antebellum period, as land was concentrated in the hands of a few slaveholders, southern nonslaveholding white people were largely

unable to partake in land ownership. Only after the Civil War did many more white people benefit from "whiteness as property," in part through homesteading (free land), a policy strongly pushed for by antislavery elites – who argued for, in addition to freedom from slavery, white people's inherent interests in property. How do we explain what changed, and the specific ideology – that white people have an interest in property – which helped shape this policy? Using the case of the Homestead Act of 1862, I argue antislavery elites *articulated* a property interest in whiteness. The Homestead Act is an example of struggles to articulate southern poor white people's ideal relationship to landed property, according to antislavery conceptions of middle-class farming and agrarian capitalism. I show articulation processes, as antislavery figures responded to white poverty in the South, resulting in arguments for free land for white people. I also show a shift in rhetoric among antislavery Republicans in the late 1850s and early 1860s, in which they expanded their framing of homesteading to include an emphasis on bringing poor white people into modernity and civilization compatible with the politics of scientific agriculture. This article complicates accounts of whiteness as property by tracing historically specific ideologies of whiteness and land in the south in the antebellum period. In *The Souls of White Folk*, W.E.B Du Bois (1920: 30) wrote, "But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?' Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!"

In 1920, W.E.B. Du Bois defined whiteness as a historically modern concept tied to land as "ownership of the earth" (30). Decades later, as Cheryl Harris (1993) argued, US "law has recognized a property interest in whiteness that . . . now forms the background against which legal disputes are framed, argued, and adjudicated" (1713–1714). The federal government has played a role in creating this principle, what Harris called "whiteness as property." It has been maintained through historic policies that allocate property ownership across racially structured class lines. While scholars (Lipsitz 2018; Rothstein 2017) have tended to emphasize policies such as redlining in the twentieth century, a key nineteenth-century policy that allocated property ownership in this way was the Homestead Act of 1862, which distributed land, mostly to white people, after the Civil War.

Yet, prior to the Civil War, many white people, especially in the South, were unable to benefit from whiteness as property. While slavery was a white supremacist system, the land was concentrated in the hands of a small number of white slaveholders, barring most from ownership. This system oppressed Black people as well as a large population of impoverished, landless southern white people. The latter were regarded by some southern commentators as lazy and uninterested in owning land. As Thomas Marshall exclaimed in an 1832 speech in the Virginia House of Delegates, "slavery is ruinous to the whites" who constituted an "idle, reckless population," and "have *no interest in the soil*" ([my emphasis] 1832: 6). Only after the Civil War did more white people benefit from "whiteness as property" through homesteading, a policy advocated by antislavery elites who expressed poor white people's *inherent* interests in soil and freedom from slavery (Foner 1995 [1970]). This policy led to lasting racial inequality after Emancipation. As Thomas Shapiro argues, "up to a quarter of the adult population potentially traces its legacy of property ownership, upward mobility, economic stability, class status, and wealth

directly to one national policy – a policy that in practice essentially excluded African Americans" (2004: 190). How do we explain what changed, and the specific ideology – that white people have an inherent interest in property – which helped shape this policy?

Using the case of the Homestead Act of 1862, I argue that antislavery elites articulated a property interest in whiteness in arguments for homesteading.[1] The Homestead Act is one example of a struggle to articulate southern poor and working-class white people's ideal relationship to landed property, according to the antebellum antislavery vision of middle-class farming and agrarian capitalism. The Act, which provided 160 acres of free land to those who could cultivate it, did not exclude Black people (Edwards 2021), but the policy was primarily advocated as an agenda for white people (Frymer 2017) and mostly benefited certain white people after the Civil War, at least those with the resources to obtain land and prove up their claims (Edwards et al. 2017; Edwards 2021; Lanza 1990; Shapiro 2004).

Examining class structure in the antebellum South, this article focuses on a highly stratified slaveholding society in which both Black and nonslaveholding white people suffered, albeit in different ways. I examine class, race, and ideologies of land, showing how antislavery figures mobilized class conflict to construct whiteness as property in a future nation without Black slavery. Drawing on histories of antebellum white poverty in the deep South (Forret 2006; Merritt 2017; Wray 1992), I show how elite antislavery figures, including Republican politicians and antislavery writers, portrayed poor southern white people and their relationship to lands degraded by plantation slavery. Antislavery figures portrayed poor white people as a class under threat, both of economic degradation as a result of slavery and of proximity to Black people. Homesteading would be a solution, bringing poor white people into modernity, civilization, and middle-class life through a specifically Republican articulation of small-scale farming. This was part of the antislavery project against the "slave power."

Using primary and secondary sources, this article traces political articulation processes, illustrating how antislavery figures used the status of poor southern white people to define whiteness as property through material and symbolic logics (Hall 2021 [1980]) that combined cultural, moral, and economic dimensions. These logics were organized around constructing a "modern" conception of farming, superior to southern plantation farming (Ron 2020). Antislavery figures opposed the white supremacy of slaveholders – who opposed homesteading due to a fear of opening up the territories to new free states – with their own white supremacy (Foner 1995 [1970]) and in doing so articulated their own version of whiteness as property.

The theoretical contribution of this article rests in (1) historicizing struggles over whiteness as property prior to the twentieth century in the context of slavery and (2) focusing on the ideological articulation of *land itself* as a key terrain on which struggles over race and class were "'fought through'" (Hall 2021 [1980]: 234). Much sociological and historical work on whiteness and property tends to focus on the twentieth century, focusing on redlining and the real estate industry to understand racially structured property relations (Lipsitz 2018 [1998]; Rothstein 2017; Taylor

[1]The Homestead Act was not merely about whiteness and class conflict, but also about westward expansion, the use of the public domain, the economics of farming, and alleviating problems from immigration. Rather, I take this case as a policy example to analyze whiteness.

2019). This analysis reaches back farther, looking at antebellum struggles over race and property that shaped government policy. I show not only how the racism of antislavery figures differed from that of slaveholders, but also the historical specificity of racial articulation through policy (Hall 2021 [1980]).

Additionally, focusing on ideologies of land shows how the relationship between whiteness and class was politically defined in the context of the pathway to secession, in light of findings on poor white people in the antebellum South (Forret 2006; Merritt 2017; Wray 1992) and antislavery agrarian politics (Ron 2020). Much scholarship on the construction of whiteness and class tends to be organized around northern labor (Ignatiev 2012 [1995]; Roediger 1999 [1991]) and immigration (Jacobson 1999). Building on these insights, I argue we can get a fuller picture of how class conflict shaped the construction of whiteness and, conversely, how white supremacist ideologies shaped the construction of class by looking at the relationships between poor southern whites and land. Poor white people, who owned neither land nor property in persons, and who were criminalized, unemployed, and underemployed, were neither bosses nor industrial workers. In the antebellum period, they had no agency to define themselves as white. Nor did they have the capital or elite standing to define and create a racialized, colonial structure of property – they were not politically involved, and most were too poor to settle out west. Antislavery figures observed these realities, using them as part of their political agenda for free land. Examining antislavery figures' *articulations* of whiteness and land – descriptions, symbols, and categories – through class conflict, we can better understand struggles over whiteness and property through policy.

Class and race did not just inform the political reasons for homesteads; they were also encoded into the logic by which political actors talked about *land itself*. Land and how it was used or abused were specific to the antislavery vision of modernity, capitalism, and empire through farming. As Ariel Ron (2020) has noted, while much scholarship has centered on free labor ideology in the Republican Party, less work has gone into grappling with distinctly rural aspects of antislavery politics. As Ron notes, the politics of "rural communities" and their accompanying ideologies of land use "... constituted the main currents of American life" and "prescribed key terms on which the rest of us have come to inhabit ours" (2020: 3). One such term is the ideology of the white male yeoman farmer (ibid.: 3), which has become a myth of a bygone era of the American nation, but which was, in fact, as Du Bois (1920) asserted about whiteness itself, modern. As such, it is part of a longstanding ideology of whiteness as property (Harris 1993).

The article proceeds as follows: first, I synthesize literature on whiteness as property, antebellum poor white people, homesteading, land as a political terrain for whiteness in the nineteenth century, and articulation. Second, I provide a discussion of methods and background to give context to antebellum class conflict and homesteading policy. Then, I analyze, first, how critiques of the South and conditions of poor Whites manifested in antislavery depictions of land; second, how some antislavery figures portrayed fears of the coexistence of Black and poor white people; and, finally, how antislavery figures offered homesteading as a solution, using the policy as a political tool against proslavery Democrats.

Literature review

Whiteness as property

In the US, race scholars have long argued that "whiteness" is a socially constructed identity and structure of power (Allen 2012 [1994]; Ignatiev 2012 [1995]; Mills 1997; Roediger 1999 [1991]). Whiteness was constructed through slavery and settler colonialism (Horne 2020) and is predicated on landed property and possession (Harris 1993; Lipsitz 2018; Moreton-Robinson 2015).

Closely related is Du Bois's (1920) idea of white ownership of the earth, what Ella Myers (2019: 6, 21) terms Du Bois's "analytic of white dominion." Histories and sociologies of whiteness as property often draw on twentieth-century accounts of the federal government and real estate industry (Lipsitz 2018 [1998]; Rothstein 2017; Taylor 2019). Scholars have shown how white identity is closely tied to property on the basis of exclusion of people of color. Yet, it does not account for earlier ways of constructing whiteness and property, which were nevertheless instrumental in shaping exclusionary categories of entitlements to land (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Shapiro 2004).

Whiteness as dominion is linked to Du Bois's (1935) notion of the wages of whiteness, or the idea that all white people psychologically benefit from white supremacy across class lines. Scholarship on whiteness is influenced by the concept of the wage (Allen 2012 [1994]; Brown and Itzigsohn 2020), and has demonstrated powerful ways that capital, the state, and working-class white people have aligned, in particular, working white people's agency to define whiteness in the nineteenth century (Ignatiev 2012 [1995]; Roediger 1999 [1991]). However, much of this work is organized around northern workers and immigrants. It does not focus on ideologies of land in the construction of whiteness, nor does it specifically theorize the construction of whiteness as property through policy.

Poor white people in the antebellum south and land

This article focuses on antebellum *southern* poor white people, a group that has received less attention in whiteness literature but is nonetheless fundamental to historical constructions of whiteness. Past scholarship on the southern white poor, based on the premise of "herrenvolk democracy," argued that they helped to uphold slavery, imagining themselves as eventual slaveholders (Cecil-Frontsman 1992; Fredrickson 1971). More recent histories complicate understandings of poor southern white people, providing new understandings of who poor white people were: material realities, cultural identities (Bolton 1994; Bynum 1992; Cecil-Frontsman 1992), elites' perceptions of them (Painter 2010; Wray 1992), and relationships between white and Black people (Forret 2006). Scholars have shown that many poor white people *opposed* slavery because they were unable to compete with enslaved labor (Isenberg 2016; Merritt 2017).

Land and farming were key issues in the battle over slavery (Ron 2020). Antislavery figures mobilized free land for white people in their political agendas (Foner 1995 [1970]). Descriptions of poor white people often revolved around land or landlessness. The poorest white people tended to be unemployed or underemployed and propertyless, squatting on plantations, a surplus population

to be controlled and criminalized. A problem for both slaveholders and antislavery figures who politicized them, labeled "white trash," poor white people and their landlessness were a key terrain on which both factions fought over the future of whiteness and the future of the US nation-state (Wray 1992). In other words, for antislavery figures, a population of landless white people was a problem to be solved if the nation was to thrive. Foner (1995 [1970]) has shown how land and poor white people were a key part of the Republican critique of southern life. However, Foner's analysis is not organized centrally around ideologies of the land itself, nor does his analysis theorize the construction of whiteness as property. According to Ron (2020), key to antislavery politics was not just labor but also economic ideologies of land and agriculture. In the 1850s, the emergent Republican Party linked with agricultural movements to consolidate the politics of scientific agriculture, seeking to build a US state around a symbiosis of agriculture and industry. Building on these works, I place both property and whiteness at the center of my analysis.

In the antebellum period, the presence of poor landless white people was a problem for commentators because, as Wray (1992) has argued, their status challenged the idea that whiteness was inherently superior. The antebellum category of whiteness was thus politically unstable. It needed to be valorized and re-articulated. I argue this articulation process occurred through arguments linking whiteness to land through policy, including the Homestead Act.

Homesteading as political terrain

As one of the most comprehensive redistribution policies in US history (Merritt 2016), there is extensive scholarship on the Homestead Act of 1862. It is centrally organized around debates over its goals, including alleviating labor conflicts (Edwards et al. 2017; Merritt 2017; Shannon 1936; Stephenson 1917), land as a source of revenue (Gates 1968), and as an agenda to gain white people's support for the Republican Party (Allen 2012 [1994], 1; Foner 1995 [1970]; Frymer 2017). This work highlights struggles between its antislavery supporters and its proslavery opponents, the latter opposing it, fearing loss of political power to more free states. Additionally, scholarship documents Black American (Painter 1992 [1976]; Edwards 2021) and women (Hansen 2013) homesteaders, and provides critical analytical lenses on the role of settler colonialism (ibid.; Edwards et al. 2017). Others theorize the role of whiteness in homesteading policy (Allen 2012 [1994], 1; Frymer 2017). While I build on these works and use the policy as a case study, my focus is less on the Homestead Act itself and more specifically on *how* the policy was a rhetorical and economic political terrain for articulating whiteness as landed property.[2]

To conceptualize nineteenth-century land struggles and whiteness, some scholarship (Almaguer 1994; Frymer 2017; Wray 1992) has drawn on Omi and

[2]In this framework, the fact that the Homestead Act of 1862 ended up including Black homesteaders is significant—a history which Painter (1992 [1976]) has astutely documented. But it is largely a separate discussion beyond the purview of this article, as the ideological struggles over whiteness and property—of which homesteading was but one—were key to shaping property structure and racial inequality after the Civil War (Shapiro 2004; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Merritt 2016).

Winant's (2015 [1986]) framework of *racial formation*, whereby the state and everyday actors play a role in "the production of racial meanings or the racial subjection of the population" (142). While Omi and Winant's framework analyzes economic inequality, because it is conceptualized *a priori* "in racial terms," it is less oriented around class and property relations as driving forces in racial struggles (Magubane 2022). Yet I argue that the case of poor white people and homesteading demonstrates that, while struggles over land and whiteness are not reducible to class, class relations drive racial meaning-making. Alternatively, I argue that *articulation* offers a flexible and less reductive approach to the way whiteness as property is constructed through class structure, which drives, but does not predetermine, racial meanings.

Articulation

In political and class struggles, actors fight over ideologies, competing for dominant logics, symbols, and meanings. Actors link experiences to systems of meaning through processes of articulation. Stuart Hall (2018 [1986]) defines articulation as "a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures" (235). Articulation links social structure and symbolic logic (Omi and Winant 2015 [1986]). For instance, the practice of segregation and labor segmentation along ascribed "racial" categories has resulted in imagined conflations or "linkings" of unfreedom with slavery and "Blackness," linking freedom with "whiteness." These processes operate through class relations, are historically specific, and are not inevitable. Rather, racial ideologies are struggled over (Hall (2018 [1986]).

Ideologies have material consequences. Ideological struggles in government policy reconfigure social structure and thus lived experience. In struggles over whiteness, political actors articulated whiteness in new, competing ways, with old assumptions to create new systems and new political agendas. They thus had the power to shape exclusions and inclusions in future property relations.

Responding to Zine Magubane's (2022) call to deploy a historically specific "class analytic" to the study of race, and Foner's (2002: 57) call for whiteness "to be refined and historicized," I analyze a historical example of ideological struggles over whiteness and property. I argue this deepens an understanding of both US white supremacy and class by showing how racial articulation occurs through class and political struggle.

Methods and background

I examine primary and secondary sources delimited by discussions about slavery, whiteness, land, and labor. With the guidance of secondary sources, I located primary sources through web searches, as well as the *Library of Congress Archives* and *Proquest Congressional Database*. I also examined political pamphlets, news articles, and observations from northern travelers to the south.

There is a dearth of perspectives from poor white people themselves, because most poor white people were illiterate, homeless, and criminalized (Merritt 2017).

Most primary sources I analyze come from northern "elite whites" (Feagin and Elias 2013: 938). Drawing on Feagin and Elias's "systemic racism" framework, this is consistent with the tendency for elites to be "at the forefront of discussion of racial oppression" (Feagin and Elias 2013: 938). I define these commentators as elite because, in contrast to the southern poor and working classes, most were highly educated and had careers in journalism, politics, and research. The majority of Republicans and agrarian reformers were middle or upper class, advanced middle-class capitalist understandings of politics, and prescribed middle-class agrarian ways of life to the poor white people (Ron 2020). I refer to them as "antislavery figures" because most were not radical abolitionists and some were not Republicans.

I draw on Merritt's and Forret's work, which defines poor white people as landless nonslaveholders with close to no wealth (Merritt 2017: 16), most of whom lived in precarious realities "and remained permanently impoverished" (Forret 2006: 12). This definition corroborates with primary sources analyzed in this article, where observations of poor white people by antislavery writers, travelers, and politicians vividly describe squatting and homelessness or mingling with the enslaved in streets and underground markets.

Antislavery figures, homesteading, and poor whites

In the 1840s and 1850s, new forms of communication, railway transport, immigration, and worsening economic inequality, helped abolitionism grow in influence (Foner 1995 [1970]). During these decades antislavery figures and agrarian reformers broadly united against the "slave power." A powerful movement took shape, an agricultural reform movement, "keyed to the slogan of 'scientific agriculture'" and broadly composed of "northern, middle-class farmers and rural businessmen" (Ron 2020: 5). Though advocating for a "nonpartisan" agenda, it coalesced around the Republican Party. Their economic agenda was central to opposing slaveholders (Earle 2004; Ron 2020). Agricultural reformers envisioned a developing capitalist state that would foster industrial agriculture with small free productive farmers, in contrast to large plantation farms. They tied their economic ideology to progress, civilization, and modernity, the opposite of the South, regarded as premodern and decaying (Foner 1995 [1970]).

Homesteading – free land for settlers – emerged as early as the 1820s, but calls for free land increased in the 1840s and 1850s. For agricultural reformers, there were many reasons to support homesteading, including alleviating issues from immigration, escaping poor social conditions thought to lead to bad behavior, and expansion west (Gates 1968; Edwards et al. 2017; Stephenson 1917). As I will argue below, the politics of free land were explained in both economic and racial terms.

The Homestead Act was a radically redistributive US land policy. It passed on May 20, 1862, going into effect on January 1st, 1863. It granted 160 acres of public land to adults for a $10 filing fee. It stipulated that any citizen or person who declared they would become a citizen, who was head of a family or was 21 years of age or older, could file for a claim ("The Homestead Act of 1862"). While homesteading was primarily a northern and western Republican-supported policy, it was originally proposed by two southern Democrats (former poor white people),

Felix Grundy McConnell of Alabama, and Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, in 1845 and 1846, respectively (Stephenson 1917). McConnell and Johnson supported homesteading because of their experiences as poor southern white people (Merritt 2017).

Calls for homesteading in Congress initially didn't go far. As most southern Democrats consolidated their support for slavery in the antebellum years, they opposed homesteading at all costs. They feared opening up the territories to free labor would mean more antislavery states added to the Union, resulting in a loss of slaveholder power in Congress. Free land was pitted against slavery in a political battle that lasted roughly two decades. Homesteading would not pass until secession (Gates 1968; Stephenson 1917).

Since one reason for homesteading was to alleviate white poverty, the class position of antebellum poor southern white people must be considered. Unable to compete with enslaved labor, poor white people were an impoverished redundant population in a starkly unequal economic system (Du Bois 1935; Forret 2006). They were criminalized through slaveholders' efforts to keep them away from the enslaved. The treatment of poor white people and enslaved Black people was not the same, as no comparison can be made between property in persons and the treatment of poor white people. Because control of the enslaved was intertwined with the criminalization of poverty, poor white people were frequently punished in public displays that paralleled the punishments of the enslaved. Poor white people were whipped in the streets and sold as laborers on the auction block, subjected to vagrancy laws, and thrown in poorhouses or in jail for idleness (Merritt 2017).

Poor southern white people had complex relationships with Black people, both freed and enslaved. Undoubtedly, poor whites were frequently racist. But because poor white and Black people were subaltern groups with similar economic realities, they often navigated the same spaces, trading goods in underground markets, drinking together, and sometimes having sexual relations and friendships (Forret 2006). White privilege benefited poor white people in certain social settings, such as in front of a judge, being tried for a crime, or in certain workplaces. But in terms of housing, access to food, and economic opportunities, white privilege had little cash value, at least not yet. Many poor white people understood slavery was detrimental to their lives. Some even began organizing against slaveholders, making labor demands (Merritt 2017).

Like today, the key to wealth in the nineteenth century was land ownership. As slaveholders monopolized land, even non-slaveholding white people who were landowners – including yeoman farmers – increasingly lost the ability to pay local and state taxes. Many lost their land and migrated, settling in areas where they would not have to compete with slavery. But most were too poor to migrate, remaining in the South and squatting on plantations (Tracy 1995). For those who owned southern land, much had been exhausted from plantation slavery, impossible to cultivate (Merritt 2017). Northern elites pointed to the plight of poor white people as terrain for antislavery politics, hoping to instill a sense of poor white class consciousness. Antislavery figures depicted poor white people as victims of slavery, using their degradation as reasoning for homestead policy (Foner 1995 [1970]).

Poor white people and degraded land

In the 1840s and 1850s, the key to the consolidating antislavery platform was a critique of all aspects of southern society (Foner 1995 [1970]). Antislavery figures, including writers and politicians, described degraded southern land, proximity to the enslaved, and the conditions of poor white people as unacceptable. This was evidence that southern poor white people were victims of slavery. At various times they articulated different versions of whiteness with contempt, pity, or appreciation. They depicted southern land and poor people as premodern, backward, and inferior, but rather than attributing these problems to biological heritability as slaveholders did, antislavery figures blamed the social conditions of slavery (Wray 1992).

For instance, Republican William H. Seward, who had visited the South in 1835, 1846, and 1857, described the land he visited as "'sterile, the fences mean, and a universal impress of poverty [was] stamped on all around me'" (quoted in Foner 1995 [1970]: 41). Seward's critique of the South was influential to emerging Republican agendas around agricultural reform. As Lincoln's eventual secretary of state, he, along with other antislavery northerners who sought agrarian reform, ideologically equated agricultural politics with "'society itself'" (quoted in Ron 2020: 9). The South's version of agriculture stood in opposition to distinctly northern visions of progress.

The desire for progress in agriculture was key to antislavery descriptions of the land. Republicans frequently drew comparisons between northern and southern lands, both regionally and temporally. According to them, southern lands, when initially settled in the early years of the US empire, were originally fertile for cultivation. But slavery exhausted soil over time. Now, on the eve of the Civil War, these lands were deteriorating and decaying. Comparing northern and southern lands in 1858, Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts declared that

> When the foot of civilized man first pressed the sods of the New World, your section abounded in soil so rich it seemed exhaustless; ours was hard, cold, and rugged. Freedom took the rugged soil and still more rugged clime of the North, and now that rugged soil yields abundance to the willing hands of free labor. Slavery took the sunny lands and sunny clime of the South, and now it has left the traces of its ruinous power deeply furrowed on the face of your sunny land (Congressional Globe 1858: Appendix 170).

The consequences of stagnating southern lands were dire for poor white people, whom Republicans depicted against this dreary backdrop. An Iowa Republican with a family that once resided in the south stated:

> It was slavery that drove me from my native state ... Slavery withers and blights all it touches ... slavery is a foul political curse upon the institutions of our country; it is a curse upon the soil of the country, and worse than that, it is a curse upon the poor, free, laboring white man (quoted in Foner 1995 [1970]: 42).

Republicans described real conditions and used metaphors of land and earth to create contrasts between infertile, wretched lands inhabited by non-slaveholding white people and a fertile land of freedom. In 1860, Cydnor B. Tompkins of Ohio stated:

> ... No white non-slaveholder can live where slave laws, customs, and habits, pertain, and retain the rights that belong to free men in free States ... A man may live in the swamps of the torrid zone, and escape the crocodiles, alligators, and other slimy and creeping things, but he cannot escape the miasma and poison of the atmosphere.
>
> ... If the slaveholder is permitted to go into the Territories ... [slaveholders] will poison the air that surrounds the fertile plains of the West, until freedom shall sicken and die ... (1860: 8).

Antislavery descriptions depicted poor white people's relationships to land and slavery in moral terms. Republicans often spoke of poor white people and land together, describing middle-class yeomanry as the ideal opposite of nonslaveholding white people. In the South, as Thaddeus Stevens argued, there was no middle class because "slave countries never can have such a yeomanry; never can have a body of small proprietors who own the soil and till it with their own hands, and sit down in conscious independence under their own vine and fig tree" (Congressional Globe 1850: appendix 142). Landless nonslaveholding white people could not be such proprietors, for "the poor white laborer is the scorn of the slave himself; for slavery always degrades labor ... They feel that they are degraded and despised; and their minds and conduct generally conform to their condition" (ibid.: 142). Pivoting to land, Stevens continued:

> The soil occupied by slavery is much less productive than a smaller soil occupied by freemen. Men who are to receive none of the wages of their labor do not care to multiply its fruits. Sloth, negligence, improvidence, are the consequence. The land, being neglected, becomes poor and barren; as it becomes exhausted, it is thrown out as waste, for slave labor never renovates its strength (ibid.: 142)

Antislavery reformers regarded the structure of slaveholding society as backward. In addition to slavery, the monopoly on land and its degradation was to blame. Southern land and life degraded poor whites, suppressing their desires for educated, industrious middle-class futures. George M. Weston, a Maine antislavery figure whose pamphlet "The Poor Whites of the South" (1856) circulated throughout the north, echoed this sentiment:

> the slave owner takes at first all the best lands, and finally all the lands susceptible of regular cultivation; and the poor whites, thrown back upon the hills and upon the sterile soils – mere squatters without energy enough to acquire the title even to the cheap lands they occupy, without roads, and at length, without even a desire for education, become the miserable beings described to us (1856: 5).

Poor white people, as became common in descriptions of rural people throughout US history, were frequently described through symbols of land and earth (Painter 2010; Wray 1992). Republicans' invectives against southern modes of farming sometimes drew on the writings of Frederick Law Olmsted, who, commissioned by the *New York Daily Times* to travel in the South and document his observations, described poor white people as degraded by slavery. In Congress in 1858, Henry Wilson cited Olmsted's writings, who conversed with a local planter about poor white people:

> 'They seldom have any meat, except they steal hogs, which belong to the planters or their negroes; and their chief diet is rice and milk. They are small, gaunt, and cadaverous, and their skin is just the color of the sand hills they live on.' (Congressional Globe 1858: appendix 172).

In 1856, Representative William Cumback spoke in Congress on poor white people and land, again comparing north and south. To illustrate "the difference in prosperity of the different sections [of Free and Slave States]," he cited an 1832 speech by Thomas Marshall, who spoke in the Virginia House of Delegates of the effects of slavery upon the poor white people and the land:

> 'Slavery is ruinous to the whites – retards improvement – roots out industrious population – banishes the yeomanry of the country … Our towns are stationary, our villages almost everywhere declining, and the general aspect of the country marks the curse of a wasteful, idle, reckless population, who have no interest in the soil, and care not how much it is impoverished' (Congressional Globe 1856: appendix 91).[3]

Southern poor white people, having no inherent "interest in the soil," had the wrong relationship to land, and slavery was to blame (ibid.: 91). Interest in the soil needed to be articulated and constructed (Hall 2021 [1980]). Antislavery descriptions of stagnating population and lack of cultivation linked critiques of the South with endorsements of free agrarian capitalism (Ron 2020). These arguments came together under the banner "free soil, free labor, free men," the project of the emergent Republican Party in the 1850s (Foner 1995 [1970]) and Republican ideologies of farming and property (Ron 2020).

Cumback maintained that instead of allowing slavery to expand, the government should open the western territories to free White settlers (ibid: 91). He continued quoting Marshall:

> 'Public improvements are neglected, and the entire continent does not present a region for which nature has done so much and art so little. If cultivated by free labor, the soil of Virginia is capable of sustaining a vast population, among whom labor would be honorable, and where 'the busy hum of men' would tell that they were all happy and all were free.' (Congressional Globe 1856: appendix 91).

[3]For the original speech, see also (Marshall 1832: 6).

Republicans imagined themselves and their distinctly Northern progressive vision as aspirational for southern poor white people. This was the version of modernity that was desirable, in contrast to everything southern. Southern land, technology, and people, were backward and premodern, and most of all, unfree. The fact that white people in the South were poor and lived in degraded lands, with little opportunity to cultivate landed property posed a problem to be solved because it called into question the narrative of white supremacy itself. But as Nell Irvin Painter put it, "A notion of freedom lies at the core of the American idea of whiteness" (2010: 34). It followed, then, that Southern life, seen as unfree, ran counter to antislavery aspirations to white, middle-class farming. Poor white people's relationship with land was a problem. Another problem for antislavery figures was their proximity to the enslaved.

Fears of coexistence with the enslaved

A central concern among both proslavery and antislavery figures was poor Southern white people's proximity to Black people in work, leisure, and play. Antislavery figures portrayed poor southern white people's relationships both to land and to Black people as unacceptable. In this section, I argue that both proslavery and antislavery figures worked to create and maintain racial distinctions for different aims, but that antislavery figures politicized relations between Black people and poor white people to argue that poor white people should be given land to ascend to the middle class, separated from Black people. Below, I focus on antislavery figures' descriptions of labor and relations among Black and white people, which factored into their advocacy of free land for white people.

Poor white and Black people often found themselves in close quarters. Slaveholders constantly tried to keep them apart. Though my analysis does not focus squarely on slaveholders' perspectives, their conversations with travelers appear in some antislavery accounts. Their perspectives helped antislavery figures politicize ostensibly unnatural relationships between Black and white people. Specifically, Olmsted's accounts of slaveholders depicted racial antagonisms in ways that were not wholly universal. While true that many poor white people hated living near the enslaved, "it was travelers to the South and slaveholders alike who fed the myth of all poor whites' unequivocal hatred of them" (Forret 2006: 21). This "myth" of "unequivocal hatred" was politicized by antislavery figures.

Slaveholders' efforts to keep Black and white people apart through criminalization and indoctrination often failed. Observers were frequently unable to distinguish between "white" and "Black" due to close proximity, including centuries of sexual intimacy among the enslaved and Indigenous people (Merritt 2017). In this context, antislavery figures drew on racial frameworks to describe poor white people as close in physical appearance to the enslaved. These descriptions often corresponded to accounts of squalid living on the land.

In Virginia, Olmsted described being "struck with the close co-habitation and association of black and white" (1856: 17). Of poor white and Black conditions in degraded lands he wrote:

> The more common sort of habitations of the white people are either of logs or loosely-boarded frames … everything very slovenly and dirty about them. Swine, fox-hounds, and black and white children, are commonly lying very promiscuously together, on the ground about the doors (1856: 17).

Antislavery figures used these portrayals to demonstrate how slavery and proximity to Blackness fostered licentiousness among Whites. Desires to keep Blacks and white people apart are perhaps best illustrated by racist antislavery figures' opposition to Black and white proximity in labor. For antislavery propagandist George Weston, that poor white people had to labor "on an equality with" the enslaved was an "insuperable repugnance" (1856: 6). Weston stated that poor white people,

> confined at least to the low wages of agricultural labor, and partly cut off even from this by the degradation of a companionship with black slaves, retire to the outskirts of civilization, where they lead a semi-savage life, sinking deeper and more hopelessly into barbarism with each succeeding generation (1856: 5)

Weston conflated Blackness and slavery, which degraded whiteness itself. Whites needed to flee "to the outskirts of civilization" to escape. This account applied the construct of savagery to poor white people, a well-worn settler colonial framework often applied to poor and rural people, and which was predicated on indigenous peoples' undomesticated relationship to land.

Using poor southern white people's material realities in their critiques of slavery, Republicans agreed that the South was to blame for white people's plight and felt they should not associate with the enslaved. Senator James Doolittle, speaking in support of homesteading in 1860, explained that "where the system of slavery exists it depresses the non-slaveholding white man" (Congressional Globe 1860: 1630). In South Carolina, Doolittle explained, even proslavery intellectuals like wealthy planter James Hammond admitted poor white people were degraded and should not be interacting with Black people. Doolittle paraphrased Hammond, stating that there was "a class of people … the poor non-slaveholding whites" whose "employment consisted in hunting and fishing and occasional jobs, and, what was still worse, [Hammond] said, trading with the slaves upon the plantations and seducing them to steal for their benefit" (Congressional Globe 1860: 1630). Though Doolittle and Hammond disagreed over slavery, they agreed that poverty and degradation were not the worst outcome. The biggest problem was relationships between Black and white people.

In maintaining hierarchies, slaveholders sought to keep poor white people away from the enslaved because, as historian Keri Leigh Merritt put it, "many [slaveholders] believed that poor whites 'demoralized' slaves by laboring so infrequently" (2017: 70). In his travels, Olmsted conversed with a planter who described a group of poor white people: They lived in small huts and some even owned small farms, but they were described as "lazy vagabonds, doing but little work, and spending much time in shooting, fishing, and play" (1856: 673). The planter wanted them removed from the area "because, he said, they demoralized his

negroes ... the intercourse of these people with the negroes was not favorable to good discipline" (1856: 674).

By emphasizing that white people's inherent "laziness" "demoralized" the enslaved, slaveholders worked to create and maintain racial distinctions to sustain control and exploitation of the enslaved. As I will illustrate, it was not just slaveholders who accepted these distinctions. Many antislavery figures also maintained "the doctrine of racial separation" (Du Bois 1935: 700).

Olmsted described seeing the enslaved and poor white people working, stating that slaveholders "need no assistance from the poor white man: his presence near them is disagreeable and unprofitable" (1856: 515). Observing that some poor white people disdained working alongside Black people, Olmsted reported there were certain forms of work poor white people in Virginia would not do: " ... if you should ask a white man you had hired, to do such things [like caring for cattle, getting water or wood] he would get mad and tell you he wasn't a n*****" (1856: 83).

Thus, despite sharing similar economic realities, many poor southern white people internalized white supremacy. It was important for southern slaveholders to ensure they did. Southerners commented on this, and antislavery figures politicized it. Weston cited an article from *De Bow's Review*, a proslavery agricultural journal. He quoted the report, from J.H. Taylor of South Carolina:

> 'So long as [they] see no mode of living except by a degrading operation of work with the negro upon the plantation, they were content to endure life in its most discouraging forms, satisfied they were *above* the slave, though faring often worse than he' (quoted in Weston 1856: 2).

In other words, as long as poor white people believed they were white, they would be satisfied with their conditions (Ignatiev 2012 [1995]). But due to southern diversity, complex relations between Black and white people were inevitable. As Jeff Forret documented, at times some poor white people aided in maintaining slavery – in street conflicts or as overseers – "But at other times ... They worked side by side in a state of mutual dependence" (Forret 2006: 16). It was common for Black and white children to play together. This was true for both slaveholders' and poor white people's children. Some fraternized with the enslaved because, "alienated from mainstream southern society and with few opportunities for upward mobility, poor whites had little to lose by consorting with slaves" (ibid.: 16). Olmsted observed "walking in the outskirts of the town" and seeing "squads of negro and white boys together, pitching pennies and firing crackers in complete fraternization. The white boys manifested no superiority, or assumption of it, over the dark ones" (1856: 113).

Both kinds of accounts – the fraternization among white and Black children not yet accustomed to white supremacy *and* poor white hatred of laboring alongside the enslaved – are testaments to the complexity of southern life. Antislavery northerners used both kinds of accounts to argue that the South, its degraded land, and its diversity were detrimental to whites. They conflated southern life and its land with backwardness and stagnation, and slavery with Blackness and unfreedom. Whiteness became conflated with freedom, industry, middle-class farming, and landed property.

Free land as a solution

On the eve of the war, as antislavery Republicans and proslavery Democrats consolidated their politics, the status of poor white people became increasingly politicized. Republicans argued for free land as a solution to their plight. Homesteading became a centerpiece of the Republican agenda, pitted in opposition to slavery. Slaveholders wanted land only for slavery's expansion, opposing any liberal land reform that allowed free labor to settle the territories, fearing it would lead to losses of their political power. Free land versus slavery was also a battle over which kind of white supremacist empire the nation would become. Many Republicans argued it should be a domestic capitalist settler economy of free white male farmers. For slaveholders, it would be a slaveholding state, the issue of poor white people notwithstanding. Both sides envisioned a white nation, however, "what neither side debated," as Paul Frymer put it, "was the question of racial diversity; and by implication, then, the assumption that America was a white nation" (2017: 132).

In trying to raise poor white consciousness of their oppression, antislavery figures drew on Hinton Rowan Helper's writings. Helper, an antislavery southerner, beckoned poor southern white people "to open [their] eyes … to the system of deception [slavery], that has so long been practiced upon them" (1969 [1857, 1860]: 40). Republicans reprinted *The Impending Crisis* in an abridged compendium version for propaganda. It was so incendiary that copies were banned in the South. The book specifically focused on slavery's harm to poor white people. In the preface, Helper was careful to distinguish between his racist antislavery politics and pro-Black abolitionism:

> In writing this book, it has been no part of my purpose to … display any special friendliness or sympathy for the blacks. I have considered my subject more particularly with reference to its economic aspects as regards the whites (ibid.: v).

Helper chastised slaveholders' monopoly on land, and stagnation of southern life that degraded poor white people who were forced to rent land, squat, or labor by the day. Helper thought poor white people should become conscious of their oppression and revolt against slavery. How would they do this? Antislavery figures argued that one answer was homesteading. For instance, as Foner explained, George Weston imagined that if white people settled US border states, it "would demonstrate the superiority of free to slave labor, arouse the latent anti-slavery feelings of the southern poor whites, and begin the process of overthrowing slavery" (1995 [1970]: 53). If slaveholding land degraded poor white people economically, a better relationship to land was the solution.

Despite having little in common with poor southern white people's material realities, antislavery elites argued for white settlement through the presumption of racial unity. For instance, in 1848 Maine Representative Ephraim K. Smart argued that the territories should be settled by northern, European, and southern white people. As he put it, preserving "free territory [for whites] is but an act of justice to

our own race" as well as "an act of justice to the free laborers of this whole country" (Congressional Globe 1848: 547).

Sometimes pro- and antislavery politicians pitted the racial politics of homesteading directly against the racial politics of slavery. Senator Doolittle of Wisconsin argued that both an end to slavery and free homesteads would help white people advance economically. But abolition needed a caveat, because emancipation would suddenly mean a population of freed Black people, presumably unable to coexist with free white labor. Doolittle argued that a homestead measure for white people would help prevent a racially diverse nation state: "... I support [the homestead] measure because," he stated in Congress in 1860, "opening our Territories to free white men will ... prevent their Africanization through the introduction of negro slaves, and thus secure in the end, what I believe God in His providence intended, that the temperate regions under our control shall become the permanent homes of the pure Caucasian race" (Congressional Globe 1860: 1632).

Homesteading often converged around questions of empire, slavery, class, and race. In 1859, the question of opening up western territories to free white labor was pitted against a proposal to annex Cuba for slavery's expansion. Congressmen resorted to mudslinging. Democratic Senator Robert F. Toombs called homesteading supporters "demagogues" and referred to homesteading as a measure of "land for the landless" (Congressional Globe 1859: 1353). Against Toombs, Senator Benjamin Wade of Ohio mocked slaveholders' proposals to annex Cuba:

> I have been trying here for nearly a month to get a straight forward vote upon this great measure of land to the landless. I glory in that measure. ... The question will be, shall we give n***** to the n*****less, or land to the landless? (Congressional Globe 1859: 1354).

Wade's comments illustrate that at key moments, pro- and antislavery figures fought over *which* racist policy they would enact. Other Republicans wanted a US state without Black people, linking white settlement to a policy of Black deportation. In addition to providing homesteads for white and Black people would be deported to Central America, where the US sought to expand its imperial reach. Deported Black people would assist US empire by acting as missionaries, colonizing Central America, and spreading Christianity to advance US interests. Republican Francis P. Blair, an eventual advisor to Lincoln, proposed that during emancipation, the formerly enslaved would be transported to Central America and provided free homesteads, transportation, and financial support. Blair and his sons Montgomery and Frank helped to author this plan. The effect of slavery upon the South's poor white people was a direct influence on the Blairs' proposed colonization project. They were disturbed by the degraded status of poor white people due to their decaying environment, and due to close relations with Black people (Foner 1995 [1970]).

Colonizationist Republicans imagined multiple benefits: colonization would develop a white Republican Party in the southern states, it would have, Foner stated, "the vast bulk of the [Black] population of the United States ... removed" and it would also allow the new colony to "flourish, and later new ones would be planted" (1995 [1970]: 268–269). While they complimented Black people as potential

missionaries, they justified their arguments on racist grounds. Colonizationists thought that Black people were the only ones who could colonize the tropics of Central America because, as Doolittle put it, in tropical climates "'the white race is doomed'" (quoted in Foner 1995 [1970] 273).

According to antislavery figures, different "races" were conducive to particular climates. If white people lived in harsh environments, they were degraded. This climatic logic was longstanding, with origins in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century scientific thought. It was a "relativist" alternative to slaveholder explanations that the conditions of people were hereditary (Painter 2010). In homesteading rhetoric, it served as "common sense" (Hall 2021 [1980]). Homesteads would help advance white settlements and uplift poor white people in temperate climates, and the expatriation of Black people to Central America or Africa would alleviate the "problem" of Black and white people inhabiting the same social space. Republicans thus connected the logics of climate, race, and class, to conflate whiteness to freedom and soil.

Some Republicans fashioned arguments in response to slaveholder accusations that they cared for Black people, reshaping their own racism (Foner 1995 [1970]). Against charges by slaveholders that they were the "n***** party," some Republicans asserted that *they* were the party for white men. In 1856, William Cumback of Indiana stated that the battle over landed 'freedom' versus slavery was about

> whether the slave power ... are to control the Territories of the United States, and govern the country, or whether the millions of free laborers shall control the Government ... I say to them to-day that we are the only white man's party in this country; we are the only party who look to the interests of the great mass of the laboring classes of the North and of the free white laborers of the South (Congressional Globe 1856: appendix 91).

Contrasting fears of coexistence with the enslaved (Blackness/unfreedom), and the idea of free laboring settler state (whiteness/freedom), Cumback constructed propertied whiteness through arguments *against* slaveholder racism.

While some Republicans argued for white settlement to keep white and Black people apart in their arguments *for* emancipation, slaveholders insisted on keeping Black and white people apart in their arguments *against* emancipation, and in their propaganda that they circulated widely (Merritt 2017). Both parties, in effect, tried to assert that they were the real "white man's party in the country" (Congressional Globe 1856: appendix 91).

Not every Republican agreed. Some radical Republicans in the legislature were close with abolitionists who made more radical demands for land reform on the basis of Black rights, and helped to ensure that Black people and women were not legally excluded from the Homestead Act when it passed in 1862 (Hansen 2013; Edwards 2021). But the broad assumption was that the territories would be settled by white people (Frymer 2017).

While there was real antagonism between Black and white people, complex relations between poor southern white and Black people are a testament to the fact that their relationships were anything but a foregone conclusion. Pro- and antislavery figures engaged in different versions of whiteness as a political project. In

the antislavery case, this resulted in a specific conception of whiteness as freedom, or whiteness as property. While radical Republicans mounted a strong challenge to racial oppression, the majority of Republicans were either tepid on questions of Black freedom or overtly racist, especially in responding to slaveholder accusations that they weren't. Broadly, Republicans united in the view that poor white people needed to be uplifted through the promise of free land. In addition to racism, Republicans' "lukewarm" approach to Black freedom can be explained in terms of ideologies of class and their agricultural-industrial economic agenda (Ron 2020).

In arguments for expanding the western territories for free white settlement, Republicans drew class distinctions *between* white people, contrasting the mythological northern industrious farmer with the unproductive poor southern white people. In 1849, John G. Palfrey argued that if more territories were open for the extension of slavery, it would mean abandoning

> the character of the independent, well-informed, and self-respecting yeoman as we see him in the North, for that of the very different specimen of humanity known as the mean white man, the poor buckra, in the southern States (Congressional Globe 1849: appendix 315).

For Palfrey, the New England farmer was the industrious laborer that white people should aspire to. Northern men's

> occupation is esteemed honorable ... His sober, methodical, industrious habits, are such as sustain self-respect, and claim respect from others ... Will you ask such a man to cast in his lot with the poor, shiftless, lazy, uninstructed, cowed non-slaveholder of the South? (ibid.: 315)

A future citizen of the nation was not just any white man, but a middle-class industrious settler with mastery over earth, as opposed to "listless" poor "white trash," dominated and degraded by the earth. These constructions rested on race, assumed masculinity, distinctions of class, and land use.

In the late 1850s and early 1860s, Republicans expanded their rhetoric of homesteading. Republican appeals went beyond mere ideologies of yeomanry to reframe men's relationship to the earth as directly linked to modernity and civilization through scientific agriculture and economic nationalism. They countered southern conceptions of plantation agriculture by proposing a specifically Republican notion of small-scale farming as progressive and modern, compatible with agricultural proposals like Justin Morrill's Land Grant College Act in favor of progress in higher education. In an 1860 speech, Carl Schurz mocked slaveholders who would deprive "'the great mass of poor white non-slaveholders the means of education, for in doing so we might raise an element to influence and power whose interests are not identified with those of the slaveholder'" (Schurz 1860: 2). Schurz berated slaveholders for their political obstruction and countered slaveholder arguments that northerners were against agricultural development. The antislavery agenda, Schurz contended, was pro-agriculture, but on the basis of a scientific theory superior to that of the ideologues of southern slavery, who failed to recognize

"the harmony of agricultural and industrial and commercial pursuits" (ibid: 4). Returning to the subject of "free labor," Schurz continued that it

> demands an honorable peace and friendly intercourse with the world abroad for its commerce, and a peaceable and undisturbed development of our resources at home for its agriculture and industry ... Free labor demands the national domain for working men, for the purpose of spreading the blessings of liberty and civilization ... free labor demands legislation tending to develop all the resources of the land, and to harmonize the agriculture, commercial and industrial interests (1860: 5)

In 1862, Galusha Grow spoke in favor of homesteading with a similar theme. In 1861, Senator Justin Morrill had proposed postponing homestead debates on the grounds that homesteads would mean less government revenue from the public domain. The House voted in favor of Morrill's proposal and resumed debate until February 1862, to the dismay of many Republicans. Grow countered skepticism in his own party about homesteading as a threat to government revenue, emphasizing the economic benefits of homesteading from future tax revenue. He then compared farmers to union soldiers as pioneers of science and civilization in a nation free from land speculation:

> ... there are soldiers of peace – that grand army of the sons of toil, whose lives ... are a constant warfare ... with the unrelenting obstacles of nature and the merciless barbarities of savage life. Their battle-fields are on the prairies and the wilderness of your frontiers; their achievements, felling the forests, leveling the mountains, filling the valleys, and smoothing the pathway of science and civilization in their march over the continent ... Such are the men whom the homestead policy would save from the grasp of speculation" (Congressional Globe 1862: 910)

Grow's speech linked concerns of different Republican interests, including labor reformers, those concerned with land speculation, and those interested in the politics of scientific agriculture. The free middle-class farmer was a symbol of the continuity of these various antislavery concerns.

Conclusion

The case of antislavery homesteading rhetoric advances histories and sociologies of whiteness as property. US scholarship on whiteness often highlights how working-class white people are key agents in processes of identity construction (Ignatiev 2012 [1995]; Brown and Itzigsohn 2020; Fredrickson 1971; Roediger 1999 [1991]), collaborating with upper classes to create racially unequal property relations (Horne 2020; Lipsitz 2018 [1998]). This article provides an alternative account that focuses on poor white people with less agency to construct whiteness as property, many of whom benefited after the Civil War due to the efforts of white elites. Class inequality and attitudes towards poor southern white people made whiteness an unstable

category. Elite white people used this instability to articulate a relationship between whiteness and landed property. That these logics were frequently organized around land is consistent with scholarship on conceptions of rural white people and closeness with the state of nature (Painter 2010; Wray 1992). I expand on this scholarship and recent work, which shows how antislavery politics hinged on agendas organized around Northern ideologies of farming (Ron 2020).

A key question in the political history of homesteading is why it took until 1862 to pass. The answer is southern obstructionism – Democrats fiercely resisted any legislation that threatened slavery. But while secession ultimately opened the pathway to passing the bill, I qualify this account by showing how in the late 1850s and early 1860s, vocal Republicans in support of homesteading increasingly framed whiteness and homesteading legislation in terms of modernity, civilization, progress, science, and industry. This marked a subtle shift among homesteading's most prominent advocates from the late 1840s and early 1850s in which homesteading was primarily framed, due to the influence of labor circles, as a safety valve for the alleviation of eastern and southern white poverty. While Republicans did not let go of safety valve rhetoric, they increasingly emphasized bringing poor white people into modern civilization and middle-class life through small-scale farming. As evidenced by Justin Morrill's push to postpone homesteading debates until February 1862, disagreements among Republicans played a role in the time taken to pass the bill. This may have led to the need for a shift in rhetoric capable of making broader appeals for Republican support, uniting the concerns of labor and land reformers with those more concerned with legislation for scientific agriculture, such as the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. As Ariel Ron put it, that homesteading was believed to be "a 'safety valve' for eastern labor" is well documented, but less acknowledged is that "in accordance with the logic of the productive small farm, it was also thought to be the best way to develop the nation's landed resources" (2020: 10). Expanding on this, I have shown how homesteading was racially articulated.

Articulation of whiteness as property through policy did not unequivocally determine the racial inequality of homesteading. While the majority of homesteaders in the US were white people, the picture was complex. The Homestead Act of 1862 did not stipulate restrictions based on race, but specified that homesteaders must be citizens or eligible to become citizens. It was thus left unclear if Black Americans could homestead until the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, which clarified their rights to do so (Edwards 2021). In the south, white violence, business interests, the policies of President Andrew Johnson,[4] and a lukewarm commitment to racial democracy among the majority of Republicans drove Black Americans to leave the South (Eckstrom and Edwards 2018; Edwards 2021). The Southern Homestead Act of 1866,[5] initially implemented by radical Republicans to help Black Americans and poor southern white people homestead, presented numerous failures – the foremost being white racist violence – and contributed to more Black migration. In some communities like Kingfisher

[4]Andrew Johnson obstructed Reconstruction policies, including pardoning Confederates and ordering the Freedmen's Bureau to return seized plantation lands.

[5]Factors such as white racism, exhausted soil, poverty, Andrew Johnson's actions, and northern business interests constituted failures of the act and contributed to its repeal in 1876 (Edwards 2021).

County, Oklahoma, Black Americans successfully created farming organizations and engaged in high levels of political activity (Dodson and Eaton 2023) and in the case of DeWitty, Nebraska, faced less racial animus (Eckstrom and Edwards 2018). The Southern Homestead Act was largely a failure for both Black and poor white homesteaders, who tended to have few resources or capital to prove up their claims. However, of those who homesteaded, Michael Lanza (1990) found that higher percentages of Black homesteaders (35 percent) held more steadfastly to their land than did White homesteaders (25 percent), especially Black Americans local to the regions in which they farmed (Canaday et al. 2015).

An analysis of the agrarian capitalist politics of Republicans helps to explain why, despite antislavery rhetoric about poor Southern white people, the latter did not unequivocally benefit from homesteading during Reconstruction. Again, an analysis of who benefited is not straightforward: as Edwards, Friefeld and Wingo put it, "in practice the land was hardly free" due to filing fees, and the need for resources and capital to cultivate land for at least five years (2017: 11–12). Yet despite economic hardships, 1.6 million homesteaders in the US managed to prove up their claims, inclusive of many poor farmers (ibid.). But in the South, homesteading was a boon for business interests who took advantage of homesteading policy as well as its failures, and the federal government readily allowed business interests to take much land to resume industrial activities (Edwards 2021). Thus, while Republicans rhetorically touted concern for poor southern white people in the leadup to secession, they were lukewarm in their commitment to poor southern white homesteaders as well as Black homesteaders who endured white violence. Homesteading did not necessarily solidify whiteness as property but was one political manifestation of the articulation of whiteness as property in policy. That the federal government readily handed land to business interests is illustrative of Zine Magubane's (2022) point that what appears at first glance as solely racial structure is often the effect of property relations.

As Jung (2019) has argued, sociologies of race have had relatively little "to say about slavery in general and about the categories of the worker, or the working class, and of the enslaved in particular" (158). Analyzing these categories contributes to sociological analyses of race before the twentieth century, in particular, during the period of slavery. Examining poor southern white people and homesteading also extends scholarship that analyzes racial discrimination in US politics, especially how racial categories are made and remade in the process of policy through articulation (Frymer 2011 [2008], 2017; Katznelson 2006 [2005]; Massey 1998 [1993], 2007; Murakawa 2014; Ngai 2014 [2004]; Taylor 2019; Rothstein 2017). A framework of articulation is expansive enough to analyze relationships between class, conflicting political agendas, and historically specific racism(s) (Hall 2021 [1980]). Because antislavery elites with conflicting agendas sought to appeal to white people in a fight against the "slave power," Republican policy needed to bring together an agenda of westward expansion, colonialism, and ideas of "freedom" for all or merely some, though centrally organized around relatively unified assumptions of white supremacy, middle-class ideology, scientific agriculture, and the economics of land use.

Antislavery logics of land operated through class conflict because they were in part a response to southern poverty. This does not mean, as Omi and Winant argue in their critique of class-based theories of race, that race must "be reduced to an

economic matter" (2015 [1986]: 67). Rather than overemphasize the primacy of class or race, this article shows how the relationship between class, race, and land was defined and constructed through policy struggle.

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Lauren Crosser is a doctoral candidate in historical sociology at Brandeis University. She received a bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a master's degree in education from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her current work focuses on agricultural politics during the era of Reconstruction and populism, as well as the historical development of land-grant universities in the US. She is interested in the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of race and racism, and the history of capitalism.

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