Introduction

Geography is fate.
—*Ralph Ellison*

In 1916, twenty-year-old Lomie Davis lost her father, Elic Davis. Born enslaved on the brink of emancipation in Mississippi, Alexander "Elic" Davis grew up watching men and women of his parents' generation move from plantation to plantation, from country to town, using their newfound "freedom" to find, in Nell Painter's words, "*real* freedom." As an adolescent, Elic Davis witnessed the removal of federal troops from the U.S. South, the brisk evaporation of African-American political and economic opportunities, including the coerced removal of two thousand black legislators and officeholders, and the denial and harassment of African-American personhood across the South. His early life was marked by rising aspirations, deep disappointments, and unfathomable disillusionment. As an adult, he dreamed of Africa and participated in several emigration movements; and when he entered his fifties, he finally made it there "on his own." A few years later, in 1923, he wrote to his daughter, telling her that he was sick and asking for her help in order to return to the United States. Lomie tried, in vain, to obtain a loan in order to retrieve her father. No one heard from Elic again, and Lomie believed he soon passed away in the Gold Coast.[1]

The years leading up to Lomie's quiet loss of her father, from the end of Reconstruction through the rise of Jim Crow, were marked by a steady wave of vibrant emigration that has yet to make a lasting mark on the historiography of the period Rayford Logan termed "the nadir" of African-American experience in the United States, or what Oklahoman John Hope Franklin

called "the long dark night." In his lifetime, Lomie's father migrated from northeast Mississippi to the delta hinterlands of the black town of Mound Bayou, from the Mississippi delta to Indian Territory, and from Oklahoma to West Africa. Along the way, he also ventured to New York, Chicago, and possibly Jamaica. Notwithstanding Lomie's memories of her father's unique freedom dreams, Elic Davis was not exceptional. Like thousands of former slaves and their children, Davis and his peers were men of meager means, rural black southerners who time after time "voted with their feet," creating a constant flurry of movement that spanned both "domestic" and "foreign" destinations long before the first steps of the Great Migration. Perhaps no collective response to the demise of Reconstruction has been more seriously neglected—dismissed as demographically insignificant, regionally specific, or otherwise exceptional. By the turn of the twentieth century, a lifetime of experience had convinced freedom's first generation, as Ralph Ellison once put it, that "geography is fate."[2]

Growing Up with the Country illuminates the migration of freedom's first generation out of the South and into the West after the Civil War. A narrative history, this book traces three families of freedpeople and their successive migrations in the half-century after emancipation. Between 1865 and 1915, tens of thousands of former slaves sought freedom through a series of experiments in land ownership, town-building, and emigration that spanned the Mississippi delta, Arkansas, Kansas, Indian Territory, Texas, West Africa, western Canada, Mexico, and beyond. Deepening and widening the roots of the Great Migration, I argue that their lives and choices complicate notions of the quintessential domesticity and "bi-racialism" of the "nadir," revealing instead the deeply transnational and multiracial dimensions of freedom's first generation. First, I show that Indian Territory and early Oklahoma served as one of the first sites of African-American transnational movement in the postemancipation period, decentering the United States in North American history even at the turn of the "American century." Second, I illustrate the gradual emergence of American "bi-racialism" and the painstaking construction of race and nation that undergirded the rise of American economic, political, and cultural power at the turn of the twentieth century. I conclude that the historical erasure of this multiracial,

multinational past depended upon the manipulation of family and kinship, or "recruiting 'family' to the discipline of 'race.'"[3]

This is the story of a group of African-American migrants whose lives were defined by the pursuit of freedom. Following in the footsteps of Thomas Jefferson Brown, Monroe Coleman, and Alexander "Elic" Davis—three African-descended, including two so-called "mulatto," men who left Mississippi and Arkansas in a hurry, initially for Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma)—the story is founded upon the history of sexual slavery and women's reproductive labor, the promise of African-American land ownership, and the emergence of a rigid racial hierarchy in the postemancipation South. So while the rise of black Oklahoma was promoted as "all-black" and self-consciously "domestic," such an image stands in considerable contrast to the racial realities of the period, including the erasure of the multiracial history of the South and West. I maintain that the westward migration of "mulatto" freedpeople, for instance, constituted a telling response to the racial "revolution" that accompanied the demise of Reconstruction. Over the course of their lifetimes, African-descended migrants experienced a constant shifting of racial categories over both time and space. Once in Indian Territory, they gained access to Indian land through purchase and marriage. They simultaneously partook of federal expansion and economic, political, and cultural negotiations over land and space with Indians, freedpeople of the Indian Nations, and white settlers and oil speculators. Freedom was not an uncomplicated claim for African-American migrants.

This complex moment of African-American participation in the expropriation of Indian Territory was tellingly short-lived. Widespread African-American access to Indian land ended abruptly with the advent of Oklahoma statehood, Jim Crow segregation, and oil speculation. After 1907, in the wake of Oklahoma statehood, these migrants and most of their black and Indian counterparts lost their land and the associated mineral rights to white settlers and oil speculators through a combination of legal and extralegal exploitation. Thousands, including Coleman and Davis, joined Chief Alfred Sam's 1914 "back-to-Africa" movement in hopes of claiming lasting freedom once and for all in the Gold Coast, the British colony that later declared

independence and established the nation of Ghana. Hundreds of other black, "mulatto," and black Indian Oklahomans migrated in family groups to Canada; still others moved south, over the Mexican border. In the end, a movement that began in the spirit of national expansion ended as a powerful experience of racialized land loss. This moment highlights the role of extractive economies and capitalist expansion in the development of modern America and the emergence of a global color line. At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was undergoing a seismic shift in self-definition from "nation" to "race," from Indian and American to black and white national projects, revealing the ultimate (though not inevitable) futility, for African Americans, of attempting to distance themselves from racism in the context of an expanding U.S. empire.[4]

By the early twentieth century, "White men's countries rested on the premise that multiracial democracy was an impossibility," and whiteness had emerged as a transnational form of racial identification, "global in its power and personal in its meaning." This was a recent development, however, as the history of Indian Territory and Oklahoma statehood attests. For while color consciousness had a long history, W. E. B. Du Bois noted in 1910, "the discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples" was "a very modern thing—a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed," driven by the recognition that colonized peoples were on the move across the globe.[5] As the S.S. *Liberia* pushed off from Galveston Island for the Gold Coast in the summer of 1914—purchased for sixty-nine thousand dollars pooled by hundreds of former slaves in Oklahoma—they most certainly were.

Coleman's and Davis's participation in the Chief Sam back-to-Africa movement constitutes one dramatic climax of this family saga. The movement illustrates an indelible link between continental and overseas movement, challenging the long-standing convention among historians of this period to treat the "western" and "Liberia" movements as "somewhat discrete phenomena" and "largely to discount or ignore the political significance of each," as historian Steven Hahn has put it. That so many westward migrants attempted to move decisively beyond the borders of the United States following Oklahoma statehood underscores my claim that part of what attracted

African Americans to Indian Territory in the first place was its momentary status as a political and economic space on the margins, if not beyond the bounds, of U.S. oversight. Not incidentally, a decade following the Sam movement, many of the families and communities that had sent delegates to West Africa with Sam became ardent Garveyites, producing twenty-eight chapters of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) by 1926.[6]

This book bridges stories too often categorized as domestic or international. In fact, the current categories would have been somewhat unfamiliar to turn-of-the-century migrants of the southwest borderlands, a region shaped by competing sovereignties, with no clear path to incorporation into the United States. Building upon the powerful contributions of Michele Mitchell and Steven Hahn on African-American peoplehood and "racial destiny" in the postemancipation era, this book presents turn-of-the-century Indian Territory and Africa as part of a continuum of flight from the late-nineteenth-century South; the forthcoming stories urge readers to view "exodusters" and Garveyites within a single transnational frame, to hear "Liberia" and "Oklahoma" in a single breath. As freedman J. W. Turner wrote in 1892, "The peoples are Greatly stirred up in this country about Oklanhoma [*sic*] . . . but we are bound for [Liberia]." These stories reimagine the postemancipation period as a series of unbound migrations, deepen the roots of the Great Migration, and highlight the centrality of migration and geopolitics in African-American history.[7]

Challenging the notion of a static and withdrawn African-American political life at the turn of the twentieth century, African-descended peoples led bold political lives in Indian Territory, and when faced with the emergence of statehood and Jim Crow segregation, many refused to acquiesce and chose instead to emigrate. African-American experiences in Indian Territory thus prefigure the emergence of Garveyism, the "New Negro" movement, and the Great Migration. Moreover, this moment informs not only the "firsts" of African-American political life in the postemancipation era but the "lasts" of African-American experiences in Indian country. For at least three centuries, Indian country had served as a space of solace, exploitation, and opportunity for African-descended peoples. At the same time, in turn-of-the-century Indian Territory, Oklahoma, West Africa, and across the

globe, African Americans were wittingly and unwittingly immersed in the rise of U.S. domestic and overseas imperialism. As the African-American teacher and orator Alfred M. Green had prophesied four decades earlier, in the midst of the Civil War: "There is no such thing as stand still in this nineteenth century."[8]

History, Memory, Silence

The vast majority of the rural black southerners who dreamed of, and journeyed to, Indian country, West Africa, and beyond, were "men and women whose names and struggles have been lost to history." But not entirely. Frequently, their stories were passed on to children and grandchildren, sometimes distorted along the way. As a child, I often heard my grandmother say, "Grandpa went back to Africa with Garvey." Two decades later, when I learned that Garvey never set foot in Africa, I found Chief Sam—not in Harlem or Chicago, but in the former Creek Nation, the black and Indian borderlands of Oklahoma. Just as the Great Migration had largely displaced the quieter history of black rural emigration at the nadir, so had Garveyism displaced descendants' memories of the Chief Sam movement.[9]

I have located the linkages between these movements by entering each one through the lives that created it. I would not have seen these connections so clearly were it not for the circumstances of my own life. I am a descendant of the three principal actors documented in this book: Thomas Jefferson Brown and Monroe Coleman, both my great-great-grandfathers, and Coleman's first cousin, Alexander Davis. I am also a descendant of Brown's African Creek wife, Julia Simon. Because of these relationships, I have had access to several family letters from the turn of the twentieth century, as well as extensive genealogical detail and family stories, which would have been otherwise unavailable. I have relied on family lore and storytelling as well as archival research.

I have gathered descendants' stories of family migrations, settlements, land ownership, and land loss amid continental expansion and the growth of plantation slavery; the Civil War and Reconstruction; U.S. expansionism,

Jim Crow segregation, and the Great Migration; and the flowering of "racial destiny" and early black nationalism. While I have followed the lead of descendants' stories, I have tested their memories, hypotheses, and speculations about our ancestors' lives against the archival record and the recollections of others who traveled the same routes and faced similar experiences. I have brought much skepticism to family narratives. I have kept my eye on the distance between how the past was remembered and how it may have happened. And while the questions I have pursued have frequently diverged from those that most interest familial descendants, local genealogists, and amateur historians, I have increasingly found ways to appreciate the stakes of these divergent perspectives. History may be "the enemy of memory," as one historian has written, "but there are regions of the past that only memory knows."[10]

Along the way, one of the most persistent patterns I noticed was that the family stories about slavery and freedom I heard at home were largely stories about men—about men my family took pride in as quiet and not so quiet freedom fighters who escaped lynchings, purchased land, built schools, and fought back at white night riders before heading to the Creek nation in the middle of the night. I had probably heard the same prideful story about Grandpa Coleman arriving "by train" to Oklahoma repeated a hundred times before I learned to listen and probe for words about his wives Margaret Johnson Coleman, Belle Johnson Coleman, or Ida Carroll Coleman. I have tried to dig beneath the singular stories about Coleman and his patriarch peers to unearth the faint yet firm footsteps of their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. As historians of laboring women know all too well, the women whose stories I sought typically did not write, their names changed more than once, and they died earlier than the men with whom they lived. While some black Indian women owned property in early Oklahoma, most of the African-American women migrants in this story did not.

Yet the keepers of these stories were women. It was the daughters and granddaughters of the men at the center of these narratives who shared them with me as a child. Growing up, I was blessed with many phenomenal women, who talked a great deal about the men in our family. One of these

was Marzetta Brown Wesley, my grandmother's eldest sister, who served as one of our family historians for much of the twentieth century. My great-aunt Marzetta Brown Wesley was one of many women who held tightly to particular versions of family stories, serving as gatekeepers and the first line of defense against the constant threat of reputational damage. In 1985, as part of an Okmulgee County history project, Marzetta wrote a short family history entry on the Brown-Coleman clan. There she described Monroe Coleman, her grandfather, as a successful businessman and "upstanding member of the community." Like many of her generation, born in the 1910s in and around the black towns of Oklahoma, Aunt Marzetta tended to tell only the best, or most "respectable," parts of our history and our lives, for reasons that are both tragic and understandable; I have deep wells of empathy for the difficult choices she made each day. Oklahoma's black towns were extraordinary beacons of black respectability. Historian Darlene Clark Hine has powerfully evoked the many dimensions of our past—including sexual violence—that African-American women of this generation "believed better left unknown, unwritten, unspoken except in whispered tones." Reading their "alarm," "fear," and "Victorian sense of modesty," Hine concludes that "those who broke the silence provided grist for detractors' mills and, even more ominously, tore the protective cloaks from their inner selves." Indeed, as I gathered more stories from my grandmother and great aunts over the years, I began to make out another set of footprints, to gather, more specifically, the central role of sexual violence in postemancipation migration. Although the oral sources were typically silent or elusive on the subject, nearly every decision to migrate in this period involved not only the explicit threat of lynching but the veiled threat of sexual violence. Throughout the late nineteenth century, sexual violence against freedwomen and their daughters was the quiet but constant counterpart to southern "lynch law."[11]

These "hidden transcripts" are the roots of the respectability politics that came to dominate African-American lives—and African-American historical narratives—for much of the twentieth century. The oral versions of these stories rang with pride and self-determination, while pointing to a haunting underside of worry, vulnerability, and trauma they attempted to leave behind. In the familial and communal narrative that emerged, Oklahoma was

the future, and Mississippi the past. In the context of migration, the past became a place as much as a time, and migration mapped family history and genealogy.[12] Marzetta Wesley rarely entertained questions about our family history before Oklahoma. It was as if our family lineage and history, in fact, began in Oklahoma.

In the wake of the civil rights movement, some of the men, and several younger women, began to push this delicate boundary. In the 1970s, when my grandmother's cousin Clifford Fields used a pay phone in Mississippi to call his mother, Nuna Mae Coleman Fields (in Oklahoma), to tell her he had finally arrived in the community of Mantee, at the plantation where Monroe Coleman had been born, she scolded him, "What are you doing down their stirring up all that mess?" When family genealogist Terry Smith asked his mother about their relatives back in Mississippi, she immediately shut down the conversation. About freedom's first (and second) generation in Oklahoma, Smith later remembered, "After they left Mississippi, they *never* went back—not for funerals, not for anything."[13] And yet these buried secrets and conspicuous silences haunted and shaped the present in Oklahoma.

3. Odevia Helen Brown, front row, second from left, and her siblings, c. 1941. Author's collection

As she grew older, my grandmother Odevia Brown Field began to share memories of her "Aunt Tabby" after the move from Mississippi to Oklahoma. Time after time, she described seeing Tabitha Johnson in the 1920s "all covered up": enveloped in fabric from her neck to fingers to toes, the only skin visible the woman's face. As a child, Odevia always wondered why her aunt did this, why she was this way, and as an adult the image seemed to absorb all other memories of her aunt. To the extent that she wondered what had happened in Mississippi, Odevia found clues in Oklahoma. In the 1920s, while sitting with her four sisters under the shade tree at "713," as they called the home place, they would frequently notice white men circling the house in cars. Watching from the window, their mother would call the girls inside. Rooted in veiled experiences of sexual violence in slavery and freedom, over time these unspoken movements, silences, and whisperings became "the family architecture." To be sure, the "unseen structure" in which my grandmother lived included the haunting memory and continued threat of sexual violence. As Oklahoman Ralph Ellison put it, "Our unknown history doesn't stop having consequences even though we ignore them."[14] This "unknown history" includes countless stories of sexual violence, terror, and vulnerability; stories erased or obscured by segregation, shame, and silence; stories that fail to conform to exceptionalist narratives of racial uplift; and stories that were not built to invoke pride. Shards and slices of lives, many of them were not stories at all.

Racism, Solidarity, and Humanity: The Writing of Black Lives

This book is about the complications of freedom. In his stunning conclusion to *Black Reconstruction* (1935), W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, "Three-fourths of the testimony against the Negro in Reconstruction is on the unsupported evidence of men who hated and despised Negroes and regarded it as loyalty to blood, patriotism to country, and filial tribute to the fathers to lie, steal or kill in order to discredit these black folk." For Du Bois, however, "what is inconceivable is that another generation . . . should regard this testimony as scientific truth, when it is contradicted by logic and by fact." Here Du Bois captured the state of American historiography in the first half of the twentieth

century, driven as it was by the mainline racism of the Jim Crow era. A small number of midcentury African-American historians, however, began to tell another story. Nell Painter wrote in 1977 that for much of the twentieth century an unceasing discourse of racial inferiority "prompted Black historians to disprove these charges with concrete examples." Mirroring Marzetta Wesley's impeccable posture, the earliest generations of black historians "emphasized respectable individuals, 'credits to the race,' who have made 'contributions' to American life in general." Veering toward "considering isolated individuals in a vacuum," this understandable focus on "heroes" in African-American history nevertheless obscured the vast history of a people. The Jim Crow era has enjoyed a long afterlife in American historiography.[15]

Responding to a racist and exclusionary historiography that had alternately vilified, omitted, pitied, and pathologized African Americans in slavery and in freedom, in the wake of the civil rights movement a younger generation of American historians, amid gradual integration of the profession, began to cohere around narratives of "agency" and resistance that sustained significant scholarship of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. This intellectual movement was accompanied by increasing contestation of the myth of "objectivity," and a growing set of historians whose lives transcended historical boundaries between scholarship and activism, subject and object, and whose scholarship often emerged in solidarity with social movement.[16]

In the past decade, scholars of slavery and other subjects have begun to lament scholarly attention to "agency." Scholars' preoccupation with "agency," several historians have argued, is a problem, in part, because "all human subjects have agency." Practically, historian Walter Johnson has shown, the overuse of the concept has meant that enslaved people's actions were "emptied" of other meanings: "personal meaning, political meaning, and cultural meaning, and metaphysical meaning." In short, the well-intentioned, politically compelling "trope" of the new social history had narrowed historians' field of vision. This trend was exacerbated by the "binary of free and unfree labor." In fact, Du Bois anticipated this debate when he titled his first chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, "The Black Worker." More recently, historians of the Civil War era have begun asking related questions about the role of racism in narrowing historical imagination. The

tendency to "imply that freedpeople were all-but-unsinkable political actors," historian Jim Downs writes, was "not only a reaction to specific, if long dead, schools of thought but is also part of a, usually unspoken, political agenda that seeks for laudable reasons to counter present-day racism." While many historians seem "tangled in this mess," novelists and playwrights from Hurston to Hansberry and Morrison, Downs observes, "reveal black characters who make mistakes, take the 'wrong path,' or are not candidates for sainthood."[17]

That there has been so little room in African-American historiography for this basic range of humanity should stop us all in our tracks. It should urge writers away from "sweeping accounts" in favor of "details that often find little place in historical narratives hell-bent on seeing freedpeople as heroes." It should remind us that such characters may in fact have the most to teach us about freedom. As W. E. B. Du Bois asked in *Black Reconstruction*, "What is the object of writing the history of Reconstruction? Is it to wipe out the disgrace of a people which fought to make slaves of Negroes? Is it to show that the North had higher motives than freeing black men? Is it to prove that Negroes were black angels? No, it is simply to establish the Truth, on which Right in the future may be built."[18]

In many ways, the subject of this book was not my choice. In accepting the subject as my own, however, I have made two important choices. First, I have steered wide and clear of the seduction of ready-made stories about race and power that might have obvious heroes and villains, choosing instead settings whose dynamics of race and power are admittedly complex and rarely obvious; for instance, Indian Territory in the late nineteenth century had relatively few white residents at the outset, but many African Americans, Native Americans, and black Indians. Writing about race, power, and white racial nationalism in this context was intriguing to me. Born in the Deep South—a region built by the marriage of slavery and early American imperialism—in the postemancipation era African-American migrants participated in the latest iteration of U.S. empire—the settlement of Indian Territory and the "closing of the frontier"—in nuanced and important ways. This book treats African Americans and Native Americans as complex actors on the North American "frontier" by paying attention to the presence of

Native Americans as slaveowners, and African Americans as settlers on Indian land.[19] Here I offer stories about linked vulnerabilities that reflect the overlapping and interconnected struggles humans have always faced, and continue to face today.

In this sense, *Growing Up with the Country* is a study of how people, in the face of adversity, make freedom "real." I show that people make freedom with the stuff that surrounds them. In the late-nineteenth-century United States, this included the rise of racial nationalism, settler expansion, and domestic and overseas imperialism, as well as the continuing influence of what came before—knowledge and experiences of migration, land, freedom, and privilege rooted in the antebellum period. By placing the somewhat more familiar stories of struggles for political and economic opportunity, family, community, and institution building against this backdrop, I offer nuanced portraits of both African-American freedom and American expansion. Especially in the wake of massive nineteenth-century migrations and the global demise of racial slavery, "white men's countries" were grappling with racial and national crises and becoming "cramped for land." In 1910, Du Bois commented on the centrality of property ownership to the propaganda of whiteness. "But what on earth is whiteness . . . that one should so desire it?" he asked. "Whiteness is *the ownership of the earth* forever and ever, Amen!"[20] For a brief and sudden moment in turn-of-the-century Indian Territory, settlers of color dabbled in this elusive power with some of the same racial, national, and religious fervor that they witnessed among their white neighbors. The stories uncovered contribute to a more complicated and complete history of African-American freedom and American expansion in a crucial era of world history.

Second, I turn to the "proudly small." I enter broad narratives of African-American migration and American expansion through the window of a small number of "ordinary" lives; in this sense, my approach is microhistorical. Microhistory "observes historical change up close," and challenges conventional narratives by revealing how individual lives meet, shape, and upend broader historical patterns. The emergence of African-American family histories—in spite of vast silences and disparities within the archive—raises new possibilities for microhistorical approaches to the African-American

past. "African American history may be one of the last fields to receive a microhistorical treatment," one historian writes. Nineteenth-century African-American history has been dominated instead by powerful, "sweeping accounts of the black experience," from John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* to Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone*. Notwithstanding the contributions of smaller regional and thematic studies, on balance, "scarce records, especially the lack of firsthand accounts for many aspects of black life, make microhistory's tight focus on the 'proudly small' difficult to achieve." Difficult, but not impossible. The 1990s and 2000s first saw the flowering of North American and U.S. family histories and microhistories—from Laurel Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* and John Demos's *The Unredeemed Captive* to Martha Hodes's *The Sea Captain's Wife*. Building upon the groundbreaking scholarship of Adele Logan Alexander and Nell Irvin Painter, in the past decade, from Tiya Miles's *Ties That Bind* to Mary Frances Berry's *We Are Who We Say We Are*, I have had the additional good fortune of developing my own work amid the scholarly emergence of African-American and diasporic family histories and other microhistorical approaches to nineteenth-century African-American and diasporic lives.[21] This capacity of the historical profession to accept and reward small stories about "ordinary" black people is not disconnected from the heretofore limited capacity of the film industry to accept a diversity of narratives about black individuals, or from the capacity of local, state, and federal governments to affirm that all black lives matter.

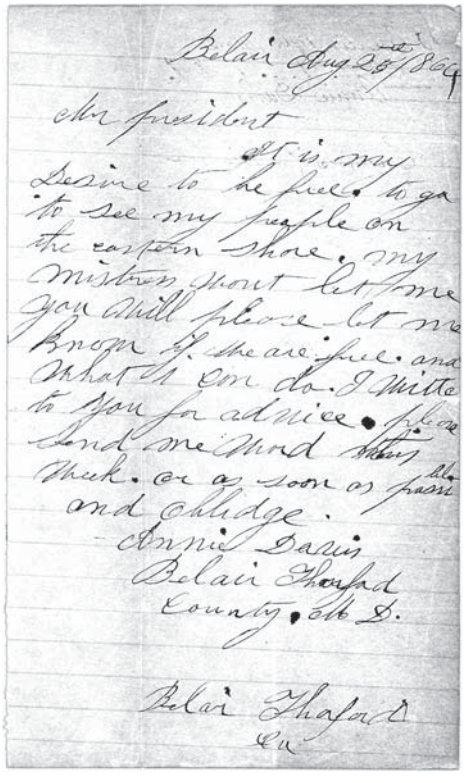
The late Clement Price once noted that "belief in American exceptionalism (writ white) had encouraged the analogous belief in African American exceptionalism." Here I am writing against exceptionalism of both sorts, in the spirit of what Du Bois called "essential humanity." I illustrate that microhistorical approaches offer unique gifts to the study of African-American history, allowing scholars to sidestep now threadbare, if not "long dead," binaries of agency versus domination, slavery versus freedom, heroism and the usual reification of race, contributing instead to a more complex historiography of African-descended peoples in slavery and in freedom.[22] What stories did enslaved and freedpeople tell themselves and one another in the midst of the repetitive trauma of separation and

sexual violence? What sense did they make of their lives in a world in which the twin passages of birth and death were controlled, indeed owned, by others? And in the violent aftermath of such a world? What kinds of catharsis have family history, folklore, and storytelling—largely below and beyond the radar of professional scholarship—offered to enslaved men and women and their descendants?

These are the kinds of complex questions about human survival that family history and microhistory, alongside autobiography and memoir, offer to African-American historiography. If the lauded historical recovery of "agency" was accompanied by the "eclipse of institutions," as one historian has worried, then microhistory may offer a viable third way. Perhaps the lasting legacy of the new social history lies not in "slaves' agency" or freedpeople's resistance, but in the growing recognition that enslaved (and freed) people's stories and collective insights about their own experiences matter in great ways. Indeed, their voices can illuminate the political and economic structures that constrained their own lives, how they interpreted the meaning of freedom, and contributed to black intellectual traditions and the public history of slavery and freedom. To this end, I follow the lead of my own family members—their heroes, their villains, but most of all the majority who were neither, and vastly more interesting. I am committed to representing this full range of humanity that I have always known as a granddaughter at the table of family history, but have only rarely known as a professional historian. I would like to let "the scraps of evidence" determine "the argument and the arc."[23]

Family and Family History

Family mattered in special ways to freedom's first generation. If slavery was defined, at least in part, by a lack of control over one's family life, so was the idea of freedom entwined with the pursuit and control of family and kinship. Carrying recent memories of the domestic slave trade and the separation of parent and child, husband and wife, for many freedpeople, the vision of an emancipated future rested gravely on the sanctity of one's family life. During the Civil War, for instance, Annie Davis mingled family and freedom in her


Belair Aug 25th 1864
Mr President
It is my
Desire to be free. to go
to see my people on
the eastern shore. my
Mistress wont let me
you will please let me
know if we are free.
and what I can do. I write
to you for advice. please
send me word
back. as soon as from
and oblige.
Annie Davis
Belair Harford
County Md.
Belair Harford
Co

4. Letter from Annie Davis to Abraham Lincoln, August 25, 1864. National Archives

August 1864 letter to President Lincoln: "Mr. President It is my Desire to be free. To go to see my people on the eastern shore. My mistress wont let me you will please let me know if we are free. And what I can do."[24]

In the aftermath of the war, freedpeople like William Robinson "wrote letters to churches, and . . . got on the road, traveling to towns where he had promising reports that his mother might be." In fact, for many, historian Heather Williams has beautifully illustrated, the very meaning of freedom lay in the freedom to "move about" and, ultimately, the possibility of reuniting with family. For the largely rural people that composed freedom's first generation, family and kinship networks—with their attendant economic value—were necessary to make freedom "real." In this respect, surely they exchanged ideas about kinship with their Indian and black Indian kin. In

many African and indigenous societies, one historian notes, "the opposite of slavery" was not freedom but kinship. Rooted in the repetitive social trauma of family separation and "haunted by the need to know," as the nineteenth century came to a close, Williams reveals, descendants searched for "those who were lost through sale or through the negligence of history." This African-American search necessarily extended beyond the history of individuals or individual families; "it is also meant to help construct the history of a people."[25]

Against this backdrop, it should go without saying that when I write about family I am not writing about biology, "blood," or DNA, but about kinship and attachment. One of my rituals has been to write and rewrite into this narrative the names of nonbiological relations who were not "nonetheless" family, but *necessarily* family, as well as the names of biological relations—including children born outside of legal marriages, and the children of second, and sometimes hidden, families—about whom others dared not speak. In so doing, I attempt to fill the space between the "official" truth of lineage and property inheritance and the "unofficial" truth of who people parented, comforted, and struggled alongside. In other words, I am interested in the constructed nature of family history, lineage, and pedigree, and the largely unsung diversity of sexual, marital, familial, and household relations upon which African-American and U.S. history have proceeded and depended. This includes those who did not adhere to contemporary dictates of nation, gender, sexuality, class, and especially race, and have been systematically misremembered, obscured, or omitted from written records and oral tradition.[26]

Moreover, in the "unofficial" truth of who parented whom, who comforted whom, and who struggled with whom sits the profound importance of individual subjectivity. Nell Painter writes: "I remain convinced that historians should keep in sight the fundamental lessons of psychology and psychoanalysis: that all people, even people who describe themselves primarily as raced or gendered, are individuals; that individual subjects develop within families; that families need not be related biologically; that attachment does not necessarily connote positive feeling; that attachment and grief do not stop at social barriers of color or class."[27] Every time I read these

words to myself, or teach them to my students, I am struck by how radical they are, and how ordinary they ought to be. I wonder how different the world would have to be for these words to be ordinary.

Growing Up with the Country is a family history because these narratives have lived and will continue to live, first and foremost, within family and kin networks, where they belong to storytellers and listeners alike. I am interested in how and why certain stories were retold and remembered, and others buried. "The stories that we refuse to tell . . . do matter," writes E. Frances White. I hope this book encourages historians, descendants, and historian-descendants of African-American families, to greet such stories with open arms and ears; to put aside narrow arguments, long-held secrets, and taboo subjects in favor of rich and layered, spectacular, ordinary, and beautiful stories of a diverse people. "American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible," James Baldwin once wrote, "than anything anyone has ever said about it."[28]

"A Century of Negro Migration"

The following chapters trace the families of migrants Thomas Jefferson Brown, Monroe Coleman, and Alexander Davis. In Chapter 1 I narrate the life of Thomas Jefferson Brown, the son of an African-American father and Irish mother, who migrated from Arkansas to Indian Territory in the 1870s. There Brown was married twice to black Indian descendants of the Creek and Seminole nations; in the period of Dawes allotment, this "white-looking" father was able to secure more than a thousand acres of land, a school, church, and post office, founding "Brownsville," a black and Creek settlement in Indian Territory. I use Brown's story to illustrate how early African-American settlers initially bolstered their claims to freedom in the postemancipation era by attaching themselves to American expansion, Native Americans, and the acquisition of Indian land. In so doing, they mingled with white settlers who were also crafting new identities for themselves in Indian Territory. By the time Monroe Coleman, two decades Brown's junior, bought the plot adjacent to Brownsville, he was participating in a much larger emigration movement. Born in northeastern Mississippi in 1869 to a freedwoman and, perhaps,

her former slaveowner, Coleman migrated at the turn of the twentieth century in the fervor of racial uplift and prideful black town building and purchased a plot of land in Indian Territory from a Creek freedman. In order to reconstruct the complex origins of "all-black" Oklahoma, in Chapter 2 I explore Coleman's decision to participate in this racially self-conscious movement within the context of his early life as a "mulatto" child in Reconstruction-era Mississippi, rumors of white parentage, and the emergence of twentieth-century "biracialism." Throughout this "revolution" of color and kinship, class remained; to this end, Chapter 3 traces the migratory life of Alexander "Elic" Davis, the "country preacher" and "huckster" who led his cousin, Monroe Coleman, to Indian Territory. Here I highlight their divergent experiences and reconsider the nadir in African-American history through the lens of black emigration, in relation to the rise of sharecropping and early black nationalism. Finally, in Chapter 4 I explore Coleman's and Davis's responses to the political and economic constraints of Oklahoma statehood, Jim Crow segregation, and oil speculation, including their participation in the 1913–15 Chief Sam back-to-Africa movement.[29]

W. E. B. Du Bois aptly described the decades that followed general emancipation: "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery. The whole weight of America was thrown to color caste. . . . A new slavery arose." Against this backdrop, part of what attracted African-American migrants like Brown, Coleman, and Davis to Indian Territory was its image, migrant George Coleman put it decades later, "as a place near the border of civilization." "In the spring of 1885," this white migrant recalled, "a neighbor and I decided to take Greeley's advice to go west and grow up with the country." A decade later, the *Christian Recorder* invoked Greeley's "long ago advice" to summon "the unsettled but ambitious Afro-American youth, 'Go West, young man.'" In the middle of the American continent, in this lingering transnational space, these men pursued their claims to freedom via American expansion and the acquisition of Indian land, only to lose this land and its attendant mineral rights to white settlers and oil speculators. Landless migrants like Davis, who moved and fought for political rights instead of land, lost just as much ground in the transition to Oklahoma statehood. In the end, economic opportunity and political rights

proved equally elusive. In the spirit of "racial destiny," African Americans of diverse backgrounds and disparate means increasingly "fastened in the colored group," and began to look again beyond the U.S. nation-state.[30]

The new state of Oklahoma developed into a hotbed of African-American emigration due to widespread economic and political exclusion, the emerging discourse of "racial destiny," and the extraordinary mingling of racial and national identifications that characterized the region. Many black Oklahomans abandoned the Territory for West Africa, Canada, and Mexico, highlighting more explicit transnational and diasporic dimensions of African-American emigration after emancipation. Coleman and Davis helped to build the Chief Sam back-to-Africa movement in hopes of claiming lasting freedom once and for all. The Chief Sam movement began in Oklahoma, an American borderland at the turn of the twentieth century, and ended on the western coast of Africa during the First World War. Its roots, however, stretched across the American South and back to the transatlantic slave trade. This book reveals that this movement was not only prelude to Garveyism and the Great Migration but also capstone to what Carter Woodson once called "a century of negro migration" within and beyond North America.[31]

Today the Indian allotments that Coleman and Brown family members once lived upon remain largely untouched, save a couple of dirt oil roads that wind through the land. While their old wooden houses no longer stand, when I started this project, my great uncle Thurman could still tell me exactly when to turn and where to look for the old homeplace and gravesite, forty-five stones overrun by trees and brush, and barely legible. "Every inhabited landscape is a palimpsest," novelist Jonathan Raban has written, "its original parchment nearly blackened with the cross-hatching of successive generations of authors, claiming this place as their own and imposing their designs on it, as if their temporary interpretations would stand forever."[32] Due to a steady decline in population and economic development since the Great Depression, and a few committed folks who tend to this land and its stories, many "temporary interpretations" have in fact survived.

Thurman Brown was raised on this land by his grandfather, Thomas Jefferson Brown, who is buried there along with Monroe's wife, Belle, and all

those relations who passed before the land was lost in the 1910s. Not incidentally, Creek Freedman Washington "Wash" Bruner, who sold Monroe his family's land, is buried there too. Uncle Thurman spent the better part of the twentieth century as one of the only black cattle ranchers around. The few newer residents, white, and in some cases part Indian, who now live on the land, have also become invaluable to my family and to me, by knowing the land intimately and following signs like "the tall birch tree," and "lilies," which "always tell you where the old homeplace was." Significantly, these families consistently spoke of the family gravesite as "the old Indian cemetery," revealing just how thorough has been the erasure of the history of African-American land and freedom in Oklahoma. As Du Bois despaired at the turn of the twentieth century, the "ownership of the earth" had become central to the construction of a new racial order and "the discovery of personal whiteness." But this order was indeed, in Du Bois's words, "a very modern thing."[33]

I hope these stories will encourage renewed appreciation of the centrality of land and displacement to U.S., Native American, and African-American history. To this end, I borrow French historian Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, documenting places that continue to mark a will to remember against a growing loss of memory. This work has been shaped by the myriad return journeys that descendants have made especially within the past three decades, searching out the gravesites, homeplaces, and land that were once so central to their ancestors' ideas of freedom. This book documents not only what is remembered but the will to remember as a subject in its own right, and those countless "'black and unknown bards,' historians without portfolio, who inscribed their world with landmarks made significant because men and women remembered them so complexly and so well that somehow the traces of their memory survived to become history."[34]

Beginning in the Brownsville settlement with my family, I have spent much of my time throughout this project at gravesites across Mississippi, Alabama, Oklahoma, and Texas, searching for the resting places of any possible ancestors, whether designated Creek, black, white, or not at all. These are stories of peoples forced or coerced to "leave behind" their ancestors.

They recall earlier stories about the meaning of death and dying for the first generations of enslaved Africans in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North America. Removed from their ancestral homelands, one historian suggests, "the African born" could claim no belonging to a portion of the earth. Instead, "she was born and she would die without a home," her "rootlessness" exposed, her soul and descendants divorced from African-born relatives, "condemned to dwell in troubled terrain."[35] Again in the nineteenth century, forced migration was the rule, this time for Creek and African Americans alike—from the southeast seaboard to the Mississippi Valley in the "second Middle Passage," and from Georgia to Indian Territory through forced removal. Finally, in the wake of the Civil War, many, perhaps most, freedpeople—some whose kin had been buried in the same plot as their slaveowners—had to pick up and go elsewhere yet again.

Places have long served human beings "as durable symbols of distant events," yet it is often only when we find ourselves "literally *dislocated*" that our sense of place asserts itself most powerfully.[36] One of the most profound aspects of African-American and Indian history lies in the unwitting abandonment of one's homeplace, one's spiritual markers, and the remains of one's ancestors. As the stories I offer here unearth often anonymous cycles of movement and displacement, I hope they are meaningful not only in their capacity to transform and reimagine the current state of Native American, African-American, and U.S. history, but in their capacity to nurture an appreciation of our physical environment, our place in time and in space, and our relationship to our ancestors and heirs across the globe.