Between 1910 and 1970, African Americans moved out of the southeastern U.S. in one of the largest movements in human history. Some estimates hold that more than 9 million black Southerners left the South for new lives in the North and West. The migration reached its peak in the 1950s, and began to slow in the 1960s. In the early 1970s, these black migrants and their descendants began coming home to the South, a trend that continues today. This study looks at one region to which many African Americans have returned, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Regions like the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta have been largely ignored in black return migration studies. Much of the work that has been done to document the return migration of blacks to the South has focused on the South's urban areas. What has been neglected is the fact that there is also a significant return of African Americans to the rural South, a region of chronic economic stagnation. While the U.S. Census Bureau collects information on its long forms that can lead the researcher to a better understanding of African American migration processes and place attachments, the data are imperfect and can only provide the backbone of understanding. In an attempt to dig beneath the available data, we employ ethnographic methodology in this study. We focus on the geographic life history of Mrs. Dorothy Mae Scott.

KEY WORDS: African American return migration, Mississippi Delta, ethnography

For more than three decades, there has been a small but steady stream of black individuals and families migrating from northern and western cities to the small towns and rural countryside of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. This migration is an important regional component of an ongoing counter-stream of African Americans moving back into the southeastern U.S. This return migration became significant as the Great Black Migration out of the region waned in the years after 1970 (Robinson 1986; McHugh 1987; Fugitt, Fulton, and Beale 2000). Black migration to this corner of Mississippi, dominated as it is by natives and their descendents returning to homeplaces, is a story of people coming to terms with a region of intense racial meaning and a troubled history.

Through their migration, African Americans reappraise their understanding of a place that is at once a beloved home and a racial battlefield. The purpose of this paper is to explore the qualities of black return migration to a rural place through
empirical analysis and ethnographic narrative. Because accurate data for such migrations are scarce, we believe that ethnography is an ideal path to understanding this complex geographic phenomenon. We hope to show that black return migration to rural places in the South is driven by non-economic factors, a process that stands in contrast to black return migration to the urban South.

Between 1910 and 1970, more than six million African Americans migrated from the South to locations in the North and West (Hamilton 1964; Beale 1971; Kirby 1983). The Great Migration was one of the largest migrations in U.S. history and changed the cultural geography of the country in ways that continue to resonate in popular culture, national policy discussions, and political representation (Walls 1970, Lemann 1991). Before the beginning of this epic migration, to be black in America, in general, was to be southern and rural. Of the total United States black population in 1880, 80.9% lived in the rural South. Including the urban black population of the South at the time, 90.5% of African Americans lived in the region. By 1970, as migration out of the South declined precipitously, only 50% of African Americans in the United States remained in the South (Heinicke 1994; Lemann 1991). These data include the secessionist South and the non-secessionist southern states of Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

As with all large-scale migration movements, a counter-stream existed throughout the Great Migration, becoming more prominent in economic hard times such as in the 1930s. At some point just before or after 1970, the counter-stream took over as the numerically dominant of the two flows, so that today the percentage of African Americans living in the South is up to 56%. Following the main arteries of transportation, and mirroring larger migration patterns existing outside the African American community, the majority of recent black migrants to the South have settled in the region's economically dynamic urban centers. However, a significant portion of the movement, somewhere between 20% and 30%, has resettled in the rural and small-town South (Cromartie and Stack 1989; Fuguitt, Fulton, and Beale 2000). Rural migration typically is directed to traditionally-black sections such as the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Such regions have struggled, and sometimes failed, to keep up with the economic and social gains experienced in the region as a whole.

The continued migration of so many African Americans to rural and small town destinations in the South has motivated researchers to move beyond strictly economic interpretations of migration towards the larger social context in which migration decisions are made (McHugh 1988; Stack 1996; Lee and Zhee 2001). The findings make clear that black migration to the rural South is dominated by a return migration process incorporating a mixture of natives and their non-native descendents. Individuals remain strongly tied to historic homeplaces through complex family interactions. It is also clear that for most, the decision to return is highly ambiguous, involving compromises and negotiations among extended family members, with no guarantee of positive outcomes.

Our purpose in this paper is to join extracted regional census data concerning black return migration to the Delta with Rob's ethnographic work done in the re-
region in 1998 and 1999. We rely here on data from the 1990 Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) concerning black migration between 1985 and 1990. The Census Bureau typically takes several years to release PUMS data after a given census year. The period from 1985 to 1990 was the most recent data available at the time this research was conducted. Data recently have been released to cover the years between 1995 and 2000 and a future paper may deal with these data. To complement these data we believe ethnography can bring context and meaning to a poorly understood migration pattern. In this research we examine aspects of the social context and personal ambiguity of black migration to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. We choose to focus on one informant, the late Mrs. Dorothy Mae Scott, to explore this social and personal context. This element of the paper seeks to add to the discussion of the African American Diaspora by exploring the life of an individual, and her experience as a return migrant, in a way that projects meanings and themes outward to a larger geographic process (Inwood 2005). Dorothy's story reveals many of the themes that revolve around African American return migration to the rural South. Some of the themes found in Mrs. Scott's story are unique to her particular set of circumstances while others are characteristic of the larger migration. Among these themes are the maintenance of place ties through time and space, contradictions of success and failure in the Great Black Migration, the lingering social pathologies of the sharecropping system, the mixed results of return migration to the rural South, social adjustments that return migrants must make in their reclaimed places, and the importance of extended families in the African American community and in African American migration. Mrs. Scott's story as a return migrant to the Mississippi Delta often seems extreme in its pathos. Although she ended up living alone, her migration history was complex and family-oriented. In particular, her story speaks to the intense value put on place and land ownership, a value widely-shared among her generation (Powdermaker 1939). Mrs. Scott's story is shaped by her history as a Mississippi Delta sharecropper's daughter in the first half of the twentieth century. Before examining Scott's biography, we establish some essential background to understanding homeplace migration, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, and the role of ethnography in geographic research.

CONCEPTUALIZING HOMEPLACE MIGRATION

The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is a distinctive region. Physically, it is characterized by its relative flatness and rich alluvial soil. Economically, the Delta is dominated by agriculture (Cobb 1992). Although whites have always controlled the economy in the Delta, many writers recognize the Delta as a culture hearth for African Americans. For example, the Delta is the historic home to a powerful and stark form of blues, and nurtures—perhaps through the region's isolation—some of the finest remnants of African American sacred music.

The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is the floodplain of the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers in northwest Mississippi. This expanse of alluvial lowland is bound on the west by the Mississippi River and on the east by a line of loess bluffs. The region begins in the north near Memphis and ends
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at Vicksburg in the south. The bluffs run in an arc, southeast from Memphis, moving farther from the river, until they reach their greatest distance from the great stream at about 121 km (75 mi). From this distance the bluffs curve to the southwest and meet the river once again near the confluence of the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers at Vicksburg (Brandfon 1967) (Fig. 1). As we discuss below, our census data coincide geographically with the Delta.

In spite of its cultural wealth, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is one of the poorest regions in the United States. A report issued by the Children’s Defense Fund in 2002 notes that five of the thirty poorest counties in the United States are found in the Delta region (CDF 2002). All of the counties in the Delta are classified as “persistent poverty” areas by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service because they have exhibited poverty rates of 20% or more in each census since 1960 (Cook and Mizer 1994). For this reason, we expect migrants to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta generally to be less motivated by employment prospects, career trajectories, or other income-related strategies. Instead, family-oriented decisions in the context of limited economic resources take precedence. The motivation for making this type of move, which we label homeplace migration, can be as simple as the desire to return to childhood roots. This understanding of migration incorporates many other family-based factors as well, such as the need to take care of an elderly relative, the perceived necessity of removing children from unsafe, urban environments, or the desire to claim and hold on to family assets such as property and homes (Cromartie and Stack 1989).

For most black families of the Great Migration, complex cyclical patterns developed, based on both economic opportunity and family need (Stack 1970; Piore 1979). Many families left and never looked back, while others considered the move temporary and always carried with them plans to return. The situation of relatives who remained behind in southern communities became an important element in return migration decisions. Place ties were passed to succeeding generations through extended visits, reunions, and family obligations. This development of intergenerational place ties demands a broader view of the return migration process; return migration becomes homeplace migration when a significant portion of the stream begins to include relatives who were technically not returning to their state of birth but who were nonetheless tied to homeplaces through intergenerational or marital connections (Stack 1996).

Information available from the Public-Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) of the decennial census provides an imperfect but illuminating conceptualization of homeplace migration and a measure of its relative importance from the point of view of the destination household. PUMS data include information about current household living arrangements that lead to a partial understanding of the life histories of individual members of that sample household. Typically, return and nonreturn migrants are distinguished from one another on the basis of individual-level data, using three pieces of census information: state of birth, place of residence five years prior to the census, and current residence. Return migrants lived outside their state of birth five years before the census and returned to it, while nonreturnees made a move that did not involve returning to their state of
Figure 1. Location of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.
birth. The combination of household and individual information in the PUMS, however, shows that many of those categorized as nonreturnees are actually connected to the destination through family ties. Often they are spouses and children born outside the region who are moving with a return migrant back to a place that we argue constitutes a homeplace given the role, and place-based biography, that the destination region plays in these migrant’s lives. The household structure may also involve nonreturn migrants joining existing households, such as children joining parents or grandparents (Cromartie and Stack 1989).

A 1989 study found that return migration, as traditionally measured, accounted for 42% of black migration into the South during 1975–80, but that a broader classification of homeplace migration accounted for closer to 70% (Cromartie and Stack 1989). For children ages 18 and under, the contrast was even greater: only 30% were technically returning to their home state but 75% were moving with, or joining households with, one or more natives. Other studies of African American migration drew similar statistical findings regarding linked and independent migrants. Although employing slightly different classification methods, their analysis of linked migration showed that household composition reflecting homeplace ties was a crucial factor in determining destination choice and socioeconomic well-being among black migrants (Lee and Roseman 1997, Lee and Zhee 2001).

BLACK HOMEPLACE MIGRATION TO THE DELTA, 1985–1990

We extracted previous residence information from the long form of the decennial census—state of birth and 1985 place of residence—along with various demographic attributes (e.g., age, education) for all members of households in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta containing a black migrant from outside the South. State of birth indicates historic attachments to place for the sampled African American. Scholars long have shown the strong ties that exist between the African American population outside the South and southern homeplaces within the region (Stack 1974; Robinson 1986; Cobb 1992). For protection of confidentiality, names are not included in the PUMS and the sample is coded geographically to a group of counties or county parts known as Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAS), containing not less than 100,000 people. For this analysis we chose two PUMAS that cover most of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta as typically defined, with some inclusion of non-Delta counties (Fig. 2). PUMS 0700 is composed of six Mississippi counties which lie completely within the alluvial floodplain known as the Delta. In fact, the eastern boundaries of three counties (Tunica, Quitman, and LeFlore) mirror the loess bluffs at the eastern edge of the region. PUMS 0100 is more problematic in its regional clarity than region 0700. PUMS 0100 is composed of seven whole counties, four of which are wholly within the Delta. Three other counties (Desoto, Tate, and Panola) are partially within the alluvial floodplain and partially on the loess hills to the east. Desoto County is particularly anomalous given its proximity to Memphis, Tennessee. As a result of this relative location, Desoto County’s demographic and economic qualities are markedly different than those of the core Delta counties. We elected to retain PUMS 0100 in our dataset given the
Figure 2. Mississippi’s Public Use Microdata Areas (Bureau of the Census 1990). The two PUMAS in the northwest part of the state, 00100 and 00700, are used in this study to represent the Delta.
fact that the majority of the data region is in the Delta. Ultimately, the two PUMS regions, taken together, are strikingly consistent with the Delta, both as a cultural and physical region.

Between 1985 and 1990, an estimated 4,500 blacks migrated to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta PUMAS from states outside the South. Based on the state of birth information, 66% of them were return migrants (Table 1). Using the definition outlined above, however, 87% of black movers to the Delta were homeplace migrants, either returning to their home state or joining households in which there lived a native of Mississippi. That leaves less than 500 migrants with no family connection to the region evident in their household composition. Many of these, undoubtedly, moved based on previous personal or family ties to the destination, but formed households either by themselves or with other nonreturnees. Likewise, some African Americans included in these numbers may not be homeplace return migrants as we define them. Some, for example, may be returning to the Mississippi Delta though they were born in some other region of the state. This must certainly be true for some. We believe, however, that it is likely that most are returning to a homeplace in the Delta. Economic conditions are so difficult in the Delta region that it seems unlikely that many of these migrants are coming into the region as a result of some regional pull factor. Even if it is so that some of these migrants were born in some other part of the state, the strong sense of place attachment to Mississippi as a state would indicate that returning to any part of the state, regardless of where in the state that migrant was born, could be understood as a homeplace migration. The writer Willie Morris, who was born in Yazoo City on the southern edge of the Delta, returned to his home state after many years in New York. His recollections of his home state were of a whole; they were simply of Mississippi. Morris reflects, “There is something that matters in a state which elicits in its sons and daughters of both races, wherever they live, such emotions of fidelity and rage and passion” (Morris 1997, 433).

The data show that a total of 4,104 non-migrants lived in houses in which there was a homeplace migrant. These residents provide evidence of the paramount importance of familial and social linkages to home places in the Delta. Some of these

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of black return migrants to the Mississippi Delta, 1985–1990</td>
<td>2,979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of non-migrants living in households in which there was a return migrant</td>
<td>4,104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age of linked return migrants</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age of all black migrants to the Delta</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of all return migrants living at or below the poverty level</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of all Delta blacks living at or below the poverty level</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
non-migrants (17%) were not born in the state of Mississippi, but had moved there before 1985 and were joined by one or more persons born in the state. Such complex, intergenerational family patterns are common; for example, the sample uncovers a number of cases in which parents who were born in the area appear to be following their non-native children who had already moved back to the region.

Poverty is a problem shared by most black homeplace migrants to the Mississippi Delta, with 58% living at or below the poverty level. This level of poverty was higher than the 44.4% poverty figure for the ten core Delta counties during the same census year. Remarkably, more than 20% of homeplace migrants to the Delta endured severe poverty at a mere one half of the poverty level, or for a family of four persons, approximately $9,000/yr.

Poverty figures and thresholds established by the Census Bureau are exaggerated for rural populations. The first issue that researchers must address when establishing reasonable poverty measures is choosing which factors to analyze. A recent study completed by the National Academy of Sciences selected housing costs as the main variable in rural poverty analysis, noting that housing costs are markedly lower in rural areas. The study determined that poverty rates for rural areas were exaggerated by 3% and that poverty levels for rural African Americans were exaggerated by 10% (Nord 2000).

A more recent study on the subject uses food insecurity and hunger as the primary measure for differentials in regional poverty analysis. This argument is non-economic in that hunger is a factor often unrelated to income; families may suffer from food insecurity at various income levels. Questionnaires regarding hunger served as the data source for the study. Results of the study indicate that food security—and thus poverty in general—is 18% lower in the rural South than in the urban North (Nord 2000). Although these findings indicate that poverty among black return migrants to the Mississippi Delta is overstated, one must be cautious not to take lightly the degree of suffering experienced by many among this population. For example, 46% of black return migrants to the Delta live at 75% of the Census Bureau’s poverty level. An upward adjustment of 18% would not place these migrants above the Census Bureau’s poverty threshold.

Education levels for black return migrants to the Delta are as grim as the region’s economics. More than half of all homeplace adult migrants (53%) had less than a high school education, while almost one fourth (24%) had less than a ninth grade education. For all Delta residents during the same census year, 49.5% of adults older than 25 lacked a high school degree. Statewide, 35.7% of adults in 1990 had less than a high school education.

PUMS data show that 51% of black return migrants to the Delta are 25 or younger. The age is even younger for homeplace migrants not born in Mississippi and who were living with natives of the state. For this linked group, 55% are younger than seventeen, and 63% are 21 or younger. These younger migrants do not seem, at first glance, to be return migrants considering that their birth states are outside of Mississippi. Cromartie and Stack (1989) argue, however, that because they are residing in a household in which there is a native of Mississippi, they are attached to the destination place.
through family ties, and as such, they are considered linked return migrants. The oldest group of return migrants (65 and older) to the region constitutes 5% of returnees to the Delta.

Delta returnees are disproportionately female: 53% are women, 47% are male. Compared with men, women who return to the Delta as homeplace migrants are older, have higher levels of poverty, and are more likely to be living alone or as single parents. The story of Dorothy Mae Scott is a dramatic example of both the strong place ties motivating such women to move back to the Delta, and the dire economic and social circumstances they often confront. Realizing the analytical value of Mrs. Scott’s biography requires understanding the importance of ethnography as a methodology.

**IMPORTANCE OF ETHNOGRAPHY**

Ethnographic methods of research are underrepresented in human geography compared to other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Yet, geographers are increasingly turning to ethnography, along with a host of other qualitative methodologies, as they search for embedded meaning in place-based studies. In a paper that advocates ethnographic practice in geography, Herbert (2000) writes that ethnography can be a powerful tool for geographers if their work is theoretically informed and structurally sensitive. Between 1994 and 1998, only 3 of 85 human geography studies appearing in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* employed this qualitative technique. Perhaps the dearth of ethnography in geography journals is due to unfamiliarity with the method. This unfamiliarity may lead to criticism. The following three criticisms of ethnographic methods appear most often. First, ethnographic methods are considered to be ideographic, thus generalizations are difficult to justify, and thus are described merely as “interesting stories.” Second, ethnographic methods are unscientific. The third criticism—which Rob deals with in the body of the ethnographic narrative—comes from within the ranks of human geographers interested in such work. These scholars have serious reservations concerning the manner in which the texts are produced, specifically that geographers employing participant observation are insensitive to the power relations that often accompany them in the field (Herbert 2000).

The life story of Dorothy Scott that follows certainly is but one of many examples of return migration to the Mississippi Delta. Mrs. Scott’s story is, however, common to the oldest age group of returnees to the region. Rob makes this observation through his contacts with several older return migrants to the region. This example might prove problematic for some readers given its apparent limited scope. Mrs. Scott’s life history, however, reveals broader themes in black return migration to the Delta and helps to alleviate these concerns of generalizations. Though a more detailed discussion of these themes appears in the conclusion to the paper, we argue that Dorothy Scott’s story reveals the maintenance of place bound identity for return migrants to the region. In addition, the travails that Mrs. Scott encounters upon returning to the Delta (poverty, struggles to deal with regional culture attitudes, and attachment to imagined place)
are common to almost all Delta returnees Rob encountered. Ethnography can carry the power of generalization if other researchers have found similar processes in other studies and regions. Anthropologist Carol Stack found similar themes to exist in her 1996 work *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South*. Her field work was conducted in the Coastal Plain of North and South Carolina. Her informants, most of whom had returned to the Carolinas from the urban Northeast, were motivated in their return migration, just as was the case for Mrs. Scott in Mississippi, by family and place ties (Stack 1996). Rob’s ethnographic study, conducted in the Mississippi Delta, serves to show that the experience of Stack’s informants in the Carolinas is one that is taking place across the Deep South. Ultimately, however, Mrs. Scott’s story testifies to its own importance. It has worth as one powerful story of black return migration to the rural South and helps bring context to the larger placed-based process (Herbert 2000).

Addressing the issue of science, our intention here is to use ethnographic narrative to build upon what we have established through the extraction of census data. Our data establish the evidence of a spatial phenomenon and thus makes our ethnographic narrative more palatable in light of scientific validity. Herbert points out the irony that interpretation is common to all the sciences, and that ethnographic fieldwork is involved in this same process. Ethnographers draw meanings and themes from participant observation in much the same way that others gather demographic or physical data in scientific field work. We attempt to show in the paper that our ethnographic narrative blends well with our extracted census data, thus helping to alleviate concerns that our interpretations are unscientific.

Family living arrangements of black returnees to the Mississippi Delta play a central role in much of the migration to the region. Many of the stories that Rob encountered in his work in the Mississippi Delta, including the narrative that follows, place migration decisions in the hands of female family members. Stack’s ethnographic work questioned popularly held assumptions about matriarchy as the assumed standard domestic arrangement in black households (Stack 1974). She emphasizes instead the notion of matrifocality, a term that implies residential complexity and a strong female presence, without implying female domination. Stack argues that black living arrangements have more to do with the practical matters of finding strategies for living within an economic system that is often changing and difficult. In these situations, most life changing events and crises cause changes in residential location and household structure. Although females do play an important role in dealing with these changes—specifically when childcare decisions are involved—the decision is more about finding a solution to economic and domestic needs than the relative power and status of women in the black family (Stack and Burton 1993). This perspective is borne out in the story of Dorothy Mae Scott.

In the pages that follow we use the first person pronoun in presenting Rob’s ethnographic narrative. Doing so not only makes for better prose but, more importantly, contributes to a growing recogni-
tion on the part of scholars to identify their positionality within research and the social relations that invariably influence the ethnographic process.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF DOROTHY MAE SCOTT

In the course of my research I met Dorothy Mae Scott, a return migrant who lived for many years in Chicago. Mrs. Scott’s migration history is linked to her desire to own land in the place in which she was born and spent her early years. I drove out to Dockery, Mississippi, in rural Sunflower County to introduce myself to Dorothy in the winter of 1998. The directions given to me by a friend familiar with Mrs. Scott’s story were accurate, and I parked my car in the muddy driveway of her house, not knowing how to proceed. A large dog sat on the concrete steps of the house and eyed me suspiciously with his head slightly lowered. He ambled over to my car with a measured wariness that caused me to wonder whether or not he might attack. I was frightened and did not get out of the car, nor did I see anyone who might call him off. I noticed an old pick up truck—presumably belonging to Mrs. Scott—beside the house, so I assumed she was home. As the minutes passed I realized that no one inside had taken notice of my arrival and that it might be a long while before anyone did. After spending the afternoon finding the house, and planning an awkward introduction, I was determined not to leave; nor was I eager to be bitten by a protective yard dog.

Here I faced a troubling ethnographic dilemma. Should I sound my car horn to alert her of my presence? I knew that such an action was indexed with powerful racial and historical implications. Folklore and history on the South is replete with references of white landowners showing disrespect to black families in their homes. As an elderly woman of the Delta, I believed that Mrs. Scott would recognize the racial implications of such an act, and that this affront—aside from its obvious rudeness—could condemn any ethnographic relationship I hoped to establish with her. Such quandaries of racial etiquette vex the white ethnographer studying black culture in the Deep South. In my fieldwork I strived to look for ways that my position as a white male affected the ethnographic data that revealed itself throughout many months of observation. This problem is impossible to eliminate, except to note that recognition of the problem of representation helped me to temper my interpretations in a way that was sensitive to the region’s history of white supremacy and my reflected role in that process.

After 15 min of uncomfortable indecision and waiting, Mrs. Scott emerged from the house. I began apologizing for my rude insensitivity as soon as I climbed out of my car. Initially she responded positively to my presence, then she unleashed a withering observation by telling me that my project would go well since I was a white man. Mrs. Scott mentioned that she was going into town so I offered her a ride. Within minutes we were off to Ruleville to see about an overdue water bill.

Life—Early Years in the Delta

Dorothy Scott was born in Sunflower County, Mississippi, in 1919 and spent her youth “making crops” with her family on the Marshall Plantation. As a child she lived in a series of small houses that often were overcrowded. It was not uncommon
for the dwelling to include cousins, half siblings, and other family members, a pattern characteristic of black American families of that generation (Powdermaker 1939). Remarkably, she lived for a time in the house with young Chester Burnett, known in the music world as blues singer Howlin Wolf.

As a teenager, Dorothy fell in love with a blacksmith named Ruffin Scott who lived and worked on Will Dockery’s Plantation along the Sunflower River near the Bolivar County line. Ruffin had a reputation in those days as a man with many girlfriends, and he was attracted to the pretty young girl. Dorothy had what she called “good hair,” and says her in-laws later joked that she looked like a “Gypsy.” In the African American vernacular, “good hair” is used often as an expression that means straight hair (Rooks 1996). In addition to straight hair Dorothy had light skin, or “bright” skin, in the vernacular, and it may have been this combination that led her husband’s family to refer to her playfully as a Gypsy. Perhaps aware of the young man’s history with local girls, Dorothy’s mother discouraged the relationship. In spite of her mother’s advice, however, Dorothy secretly married Ruffin and they began their life together.

**The Decision to Leave**

Hoping that life might be better for her elsewhere, Dorothy’s mother encouraged her to leave the Delta in search of better opportunities in the North. Preparing herself to follow her mother’s advice, Dorothy studied practical nursing at an all-black vocational school in the Delta, and moved north to accept a series of jobs as a nurse for wealthy families in Chicago, leaving Ruffin behind. Their marriage followed a pattern of emotional difficulty in which they seldom lived together. Dorothy migrated between Chicago and the Mississippi Delta, time and again, for more than 50 yr. Her moves were so frequent that it was difficult for her to remember specific dates regarding her geographic life history. She always returned to Ruffin and the Delta. Ruffin, however, was content to stay in Sunflower County. He tried moving North to Chicago a few times but did not like it and never stayed long. Dorothy, however, never lost sight of her dream of returning permanently to the Delta to live in what she hoped would be peace and independence on her own land.

**Dissatisfaction with the North**

Dorothy Scott was dedicated to the idea of living on her own land, and in an effort to make the dream a reality, she endured years of hard work in Chicago. In addition to hard work, Mrs. Scott endured occasional abuse and harassment. Living as she did in her patient’s homes, she was particularly vulnerable to unwanted sexual advances. Mrs. Scott recalled a time when she was caring for an older man in the city, who often would come into her room at night while she was sleeping and sit on her bed. Awaking with a start, Dorothy would be cross with him in an oddly playful way by saying, “Now Mr. Santelli, you get on out of here you old coot!” Even in a situation in which she was the victim of such a degrading experience, her response was to affect a levity that one would expect in a less abusive exchange. Her role as servant, and position as a black woman, conspired to deny her the right of a firm self-defense.

In the American South, African Americans of Dorothy’s generation were often
restricted, and always hindered, from owning land (Cobb 1992). For such people, land ownership became a powerful symbol of success. Hortense Powdermaker writes in *After Freedom* (1939), an early ethnography of Indianola, Mississippi, that blacks in the Delta in the 1930s understood the power of land ownership and acknowledged the social difficulties that came to black landowners in that time and place. Dorothy Scott lived within this system before she left Mississippi. From her vantage point she believed that land was the key to wealth and happiness, and as a result, she dedicated herself to the task of owning her own. By the 1970s, Dorothy had reached a point in her life when she was prepared to see her agrarian dreams come true. Through her work in nursing, Dorothy saved enough money to buy land in the Delta.

In 1970, Dorothy bought nearly two acres of land near the Dockery Plantation from an I.O. Brownlee for the remarkable price of one dollar. Black landowners dominated that part of the Dockery place. White landowners like Will Dockery often sold marginal land at modest prices to black laborers seeking to improve their economic position, and men like Brownlee took great pains to see that such land stayed in the hands of African Americans. Dorothy arranged to buy an old wood-frame house from Mr. Dockery and she and Ruffin moved the house to her small plot, a site where it stands today (Fig. 3). The following year Mrs. Scott arranged to buy a tract of land near her house. This second tract covered 43½ ac of relatively well-drained land along Lead Bayou. She bought this plot for $10,000, and this is the tract that seemed to be most important
to her. The warranty deed on file in the Sunflower County Courthouse in Indianola states that Mrs. Scott paid a $750 down payment, and that she agreed to make annual payments of $1,500 until the land was paid off. When she spoke of buying land she mentioned only this tract, and that she had obtained it from her godmother. After visiting the county courthouse, I learned that she had, in fact, obtained the total sum of her land in three separate transactions; the third was a six-acre plot adjacent to her house, bought in 1986. Although Dorothy was, in her own view, a poor money manager, she made these payments regularly and settled the debt. As she neared the age of retirement, Dorothy began to plan a future for her and her family on that land in Mississippi.

The Decision to Return

Dorothy’s decision to make a final move back to Mississippi came about as a result of a particularly violent incident. Dorothy witnessed a multiple homicide; a drive by shooting. On the afternoon of the shooting, she was in a laundromat near Jackson Park hospital, on the South Side of Chicago. She noticed a “wine colored car” with three young men inside that kept circling the block. Someone standing by the window said aloud, “Now what is he looking for?” Dorothy, however, paid little attention. Later, as Dorothy walked back home, she noticed the same car slow beside her, and one of the young men inside asked her how she was doing. Mrs. Scott recalled this event one afternoon in her house in Mississippi as her husband Ruffin sat nearby chewing tobacco and listening to a small radio. Her voice tightened with the memory of fear, and she continued, “Then they spied these other boys coming down the street.” Ruffin, interjected, “People getting killed up there every day!” She finished the story:

Then they shot ‘em, and one of ‘em fell. Then they shot the other, and he fell. Then they shot another, and he run. And then everybody run; we run, up towards the Jackson Park Hospital. And he was running and he was bleeding so bad, they must have shot him in the head or something like that. He was bleeding all down his face. And he didn’t have on no shirt. He had his shirt on when they shot him though. I don’t know what happened to his shirt. And I said, ‘Run mister, run!’ And he said, ‘You better hush lady or they’re liable to shoot you. I got to the hospital a little before he did, and he just come up and fell right at the door, right on the steps.

As she finished the story, her voice grew hushed and raspy, and she stated, “I said, oh I better go home now.” She paused a moment, and added, “But you know, it’s rough down here now. Ruleville is rough. All these places are rough.”

Around the time that she moved onto her land she bought a combine and a tractor with the idea that one or more of her five daughters and four sons would move home and help her farm the land. None of her children shared her dream of an agricultural life in Mississippi, and by the time I met her, the equipment had never been used, and both pieces sat idle, rusting, and strangled by weeds. After Mrs. Scott realized that neither she nor her family would be farming the land, she leased 43½ ac to some farmers from nearby Cleveland. In an ironic reversal of race-based roles, Dorothy Scott became a landlord to white farmers. As if in protest to this new racial
equation in the landlord/renter arrangement, the men never paid the rent they owed in three crop years and, sadly, her experience as a landlord was a failure. She sought action in the local courts, but never received any money from the farmers. Today the field is fallow (Fig. 4).

Result of Return
In the last years of her life, Dorothy Scott lived in abject poverty. For example, one afternoon I went to visit her at home and entered the house through the kitchen. Where once there were the exposed planks of the house's original structure there was a mosaic of pressed board. In the corner, water stood about three inches deep. The well water that she had had routed into the house was leaking from a pipe near an old water heater in the kitchen. She complained that the man she paid to put down the flooring should have left a hole in the corner so that water could drain to the ground below the house. Once before she had mentioned to me that whenever she cleans the floor, water seeps through to the ground. I found it shocking that her concern was that the workman had not accounted for the fact that she had no barrier between the floor and the dirt below. Nowhere in her statement was there a desire to seal the kitchen off from the mud below.

Dorothy complained also about cockroaches. She said that if you lifted the improvised flooring you would see them in the hundreds as they scattered in every direction. She mentioned, “At night they run around this house like ants.” The condition of grinding poverty had become so common to her that it had become an accepted part of her life. Perhaps it was similar to the housing that she had endured as a child living under the sharecropping system. The obvious difference was, however,
that she owned this house and this land, a combination of which may have brought her as much as $50,000 had she chosen to sell. Selling, however, was never an option for Dorothy Scott.

Most conversations with Dorothy contained an angry element, and she was prone to ranting about the threats that she perceived surrounding her on her property. Although she was never far from laughter, she was never far from cursing "some bastard" who "had it in for her" either. This angry behavior earned Dorothy the reputation as a "crazy woman." Even Abraham, her own son, believed that his mother "was off in the head a little" (Scott 1999). I am not a psychologist, so I have no expertise to judge whether or not Mrs. Scott was of sound mind. I was there to listen and to learn, and in the sober light of my office—as I read my notes and contemplated her words—there is nothing to indicate that anything she ever said to me was unreasonable. Perhaps her attitude of individual strength and determination stood in contrast to the role of subservience and powerlessness prescribed for her as a black woman in rural Mississippi. Such assertive behavior thus seemed "crazy."

It is certain that there were whites who were interested in acquiring her land, and perhaps even pressured her to sell. Dorothy was outraged at the manner in which prospective buyers would come to her house, look over her fields, and tell her how much they would love to own her land. One afternoon, a local farmer parked his truck in front of Dorothy's house, climbed down from the cab, and pounded on her door. Later, as they stood at the edge of her yard together he looked around the property and said, "I could do a lot with this land here. I'd bring my family here." Dorothy was shocked and angered at these words, because she had no intention of ever selling her land. What angered Dorothy the most was his attitude of entitlement, and his assumption that such land was useless to a woman like Dorothy. Maybe the farmer felt compassion for Mrs. Scott as he saw the extreme poverty in which she lived. Perhaps he understood that a woman who was nearing 80 yr old, and who was responsible for caring for a disabled husband, was ill suited to live in such a situation. I had shared many of these same concerns with her several times. But to Dorothy, it was the cavalier manner in which he told her these things that raised her ire. To her, he was just another white man, acting out his role of superiority in a way that had been his to execute since the days of sharecropping. According to Dorothy, her life and land were not his concern.

One winter day in 1999 I drove to visit Dorothy. I learned that day that Dorothy had become the legal guardian of her grandson Eric. Such a pattern of shifting family living arrangements and caregiving responsibilities is a tradition with deep roots in African American life (Stack 1974). Eric was, at the time, a handsome and articulate boy in junior high, but something seemed a little distant about him, a distance that seemed to go beyond natural shyness. He seemed oblivious to the pain and chaos around him. He told me that day that his grandmother had gone to Ruleville to find someone to help her with her hogs. Eric commented that he liked Mississippi, but in the same sentence, unexpectedly, he whispered that his mother was dead. Later, Dorothy explained that Eric's mother, who had been on active service in the Air Force, had died of leukemia.
Less than an hour later, Dorothy returned home with two young black men crowded on the bench seat of her pick-up truck. I left Eric in the house and walked with Dorothy and the men through the thick mud out to the pigsty. The man whom she had contacted to build a dividing fence for her pigpen had not finished the job and failed to return, and unfortunately, she had paid him in advance. Dorothy had hoped to use the divider to separate the adult pigs from the piglets. She thought that if they were left in the same pen in the cold weather, the piglets were in danger of being crushed. That morning, she had driven into Ruleville to find someone to help her in separating the pigs. As we stood under the cold gray December skies, beside the flimsy fence of the pigsty, one of the men reached in and grabbed a piglet by the leg and lifted it out of the pen. The adult hog went wild with anger—snorting and moaning—as the other man picked up a large stick and began beating the giant hog yelling, “Get back you!” As the hogs scattered, Dorothy spotted the two dead piglets. Just as she had feared, the piglets had tried to warm themselves beneath the hogs and were crushed to death. She began to groan and weep saying, “Oh, I worked so hard, and paid my last money for them pigs.” Her anguish gathered in the realization of her situation: she had no running water, little food, and inadequate housing. Referring to her husband Ruffin, she said, “And I got a sick man in there.” As if to underscore all her problems, she waited, “We’re suffering so!” I was stunned—indeed paralyzed—and knew that I should try to soothe her. Also, I feared that my presence there was wrong and that my intrusion was self-serving. All I managed to do was to pat her on the shoulder and tell her that everything would be all right.

As Dorothy and Ruffin’s children began to realize that their parent’s living conditions had deteriorated to a disturbing level, they encouraged them to move. First, a son from Utica, Mississippi, came to take Ruffin to live with him, and a few months later, a daughter in Birmingham came to take Eric to live with her. Dorothy, however, refused to leave. Abraham Scott, a son in Chicago, said that they continued to send her money after this but that she “threw it away” on her animals and on laborers who often worked for her on the farm. In his words, “She just kind went back in time in her head. She wasn’t like she used to be (Scott 1999).” Dorothy’s life had reached a point of material crisis, and within five months she was dead.

On 5 June 1999 a seed deliveryman from Ruleville found Mrs. Scott dead, lying beneath an oak tree in the dirt yard beside her house. The following piece appeared on the front page of The Bolivar Commercial on 7 June 1999:

Woman found dead outside Miss. 8 house. Dockery—Dorothy Scott, 80, was found dead at her home about sundown Saturday by a young man delivering animal feed. Scott was last seen Thursday afternoon, before she was found outside her home on Mississippi 8 between Cleveland and Ruleville. “We just don’t know right now,” said Sheriff Ned Holder of Sunflower County, when asked the cause of Scott’s death. “We really won’t know anything until the autopsy comes back from Jackson.” Holder said that his department was investigating Mrs. Scott’s death as a homicide at this
time. Her hair was found at the scene. “We just don’t know if she was dragged out of the house, Holder said, “or if she came out on her own.” (p. 1A)

It was a horrific scene since her body had been exposed for a few days to the elements. Her family placed a wreath on the spot (Fig. 5). Immediately, there were rumors in the black community that a small group of African Americans had gone to Mrs. Scott’s house the night that she had died. According to some, the group consisted of two men and a woman. The story circulating in Ruleville rumored that the three had spent the evening smoking crack cocaine and drinking whisky. After they had consumed it all, they wanted more, but lacked the money. One of the men, Edward Gene Ward, knew Dorothy, and was aware that she lived alone out on Highway Eight between Ruleville and Cleveland. Perhaps he suggested that they go to her house to get some money.

In the course of the investigation that followed Dorothy’s death, the sheriff detained the woman who was rumored to have been with Ward at the crime scene. She made a statement to investigators in which she said that she had driven the short distance from Ruleville to Dorothy’s property with Ward and another man. The driver parked the car behind an abandoned house facing Mississippi Eight, near Dorothy’s property. The Scott’s house is about 183 m (200 yd) behind the abandoned house, on a small rise above a stagnant bayou. The woman stated that Ward got out of the car and walked to the house. In summer it is impossible to see the house from where the others claimed to have parked, since there is a line of trees along the ditch in front of the Scott home. The woman claimed that Ward was gone for about 20 min and that when he returned he had a little more than $60 with him, and curiously, he had blood on his shirt. As they drove back into Ruleville he placed the bloody shirt in a large trash container. The sheriff’s department later found the shirt and sent it to the state crime lab in Jackson, where it remained for several months. Ward argued that the blood on his shirt came from one of Dorothy’s hogs.

Several months passed and the shirt still had not been processed by the crime lab. Without a report from the state crime lab to provide criminal evidence, a Sunflower County grand jury declined to hand down an indictment in the case because there was no physical proof linking the suspect to the crime. Although Ward allegedly had made an oblique confession to a deputy sheriff during his extradition from Indiana (to which he had fled), he was released without charge (Scott 1999). Ward was arrested again in the fall of 2000, for breaking into the home of a 93-yr old African American woman, raping her, and nearly beating her to death. The woman remained in intensive care for several weeks, but lived to testify against Ward, and he is now serving a life sentence in the state penitentiary at Parchman, Mississippi. The district attorney of Sunflower County argued that because Ward already was serving a life sentence, there was no need to pursue the case against him in the death of Dorothy Scott.

In order to fulfill her agrarian dream Dorothy Scott was willing to suffer material discomfort. She lacked running water, relief from heat and cold, and basic sanitation. Many people urged Dorothy to sell some or all of her land to raise the money to improve her physical situation, but such
Figure 5. Wreath placed on the site of Mrs. Scott’s death. Photograph by Rob Brown (1999).
a notion was difficult for her to understand or even to consider. On several occasions I talked to her about the value of Delta farmland and what she might potentially profit by selling it and that such a venture could finance improvements on her home or might purchase a fine house in Cleveland or Ruleville. Whenever I broached such a topic she gave me a polite gaze of incomprehension that seemed to say, “Sell my land? Why would I sell my land?” Similar themes flowed through most conversations I had with Mrs. Scott. These discussions often ran a predictable course and contained recurring themes: white people want my land, I must protect my land, and I will not let them take my land.

Mrs. Scott’s dreams for her return migration seemed to have been fulfilled by the early 1980s. She owned land, implements, livestock, and a house. All she needed was her family to help her, yet her family was scattered across the United States as a result of the Great Black Migration. Dorothy’s family expressed no interest in claiming a piece of the Mississippi Delta as a homeplace. In the case of the Scott family, the Great Black Migration severed ties to the same land that might have brought meaning to them as African Americans with ties to the South.

A few months after her murder I called the Sunflower County sheriff’s office and the dispatcher there told me that they had all known Dorothy and that they were all fond of her. The dispatcher finished our conversation by saying, “She just refused to leave.” She refused to leave the land that she had bought with a lifetime of dreams and labor. To leave would have been an abandonment of all that her life had come to mean.

EPILOGUE

There have been significant developments regarding Mrs. Scott’s land since her death. Her heirs no longer own the land. The land and property passed into the hands of another African American family who developed the property in the image of modern suburbia (Fig. 6). Where pigs once slept, there is now a well-manicured lawn. Where once the only substantial structure was an aging farmhouse (a farmhouse framed in bricks to belie its older clapboard exterior), there stands now a newly built house of modern design. The landscape has been transformed from an agrarian dream built by the child of sharecropping, into a suburban dream of a younger generation.

After Dorothy died, her children divided her land and property equally among themselves. As is often the case when an estate—and in particular, real property—is placed in the trust of several family members who are scattered around the country, and busy with the stresses and concerns of every day life, the responsibility of property tax payment was neglected. Failure to pay taxes on inherited land is a common way that land slips through a family’s hands in Mississippi. In Mississippi, state law allows a third party to stake a claim on land by paying uncollected taxes on that property. If the landowner does not repay those taxes within two years, the non-landowning tax payee claims the land. If, however, the family makes the delinquent tax payment before the third year, they must make an interest payment to the party or company that made that outstanding tax payment (Moore 2003). In April of 2001 Merritt Tax Service paid $240 tax on the larger of
the Scott plots, while SKL Investments paid $42 on the smaller plots. After the Chancery Clerk of Sunflower County notified the Scott’s of the tax debt and the third party transactions, the family appreciated the seriousness of their problem and took action to sell the land.

Ola and Sylvester Kirk (and their young son Christopher) lived in a trailer home on a slight rise above the collapsing blacksmith shop where Ruffin once worked. The Kirk’s former home and the blacksmith shop are north of Mrs. Scott’s land, across Mississippi Highway 8 and the Sunflower River. Ola is one of the few African American highway patrol women for the State of Mississippi. Soon after Dorothy’s death, the Kirks approached the Scott family about buying the land and house, but at the time, the Scotts’ told her that they were not interested in selling. After the non-family tax payment of April 2001, however, they changed their minds and contacted the Kirks. Ola and Sylvester borrowed $115,000 and built a single level home south of what once was Dorothy’s pigpen.

The fact that this land passed into the hands of other African Americans is significant. This portion of the sprawling Dockery Farms stayed in black hands, in keeping with the long history of black ownership in that section. Mrs. Scott’s six children were as suspicious as she was about the intentions and racist attitudes of many of the whites in the area, and it is doubtful that they would have sold her land to anyone but another African American. The Scott children never embraced Dorothy’s agrarian dream, but they understood it.
CONCLUSION

We have shown in this article that there are a significant number of black return migrants settling in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Through census data and participant observation in the region, we have attempted to bring context to an established migration process. Given the dire poverty that the region has long experienced, job prospects for these returning residents often are bleak. As such, returnees to the Delta usually are motivated by non-economic factors. Homeplace attachments are the primary reason that this population is returning to the region.

In the life and death of Dorothy Mae Scott there are several themes that illuminate the broader qualities of African American return migration to the Mississippi Delta. The story reveals many of the patterns that can be seen in the data, but more importantly, the ethnography develops some themes that are not evident in the data. The first theme found in the narrative is the fact that much of Mrs. Scott’s life was dedicated to the dream she had to return to the Delta and to live on land that she owned, a dream shared by many returnees of Mrs. Scott’s generation. As a young woman growing up in the rural South she suffered the indignities that came with sharecropping and living on someone else’s land. Through her hard work in Chicago Dorothy made enough money to buy a small tract of land and was able to return and establish a place of refuge where she could live in privacy.

Another theme that Rob encountered through his fieldwork in the Delta is that the reality of return migration to the Mississippi Delta often does not live up to the hopeful dream that precedes the migration. When Dorothy settled on her land in the Delta in the 1980s, she immediately set about buying the equipment and livestock needed to operate her own farm. She hired men to build pig pens and chicken coups. Her hopes and dreams began to take a final form; all that remained was for her family to join her. With the realization that none of her family members would share in her agricultural dream, her life in the Delta began to deteriorate. A persistent theme in Rob’s ethnographic work in the region is that black return migrants to the Delta have mixed outcomes when their ideal of place converges with the reality of place. Often, as was the case for Mrs. Scott, this homeplace fails to meet those dreams.

Related to these failed plans of Dorothy’s return migration is the difficulty she had in negotiating the regional patterns of cultural interaction she found upon her return to the Delta. These are difficulties that Rob found repeatedly in his ethnographic work among return migrants to the Delta. One incident in Dorothy’s experience reveals this theme. The story that Mrs. Scott told concerning the white man who wanted to purchase her land is a case in which she and a white resident of the region held different views about the proper role of a black woman and land ownership in rural Mississippi. Mrs. Scott did not believe that the man was behaving appropriately in speaking to her about his preferences for her land. Conversely, the white man felt free to impose his wishes on an impoverished black woman who owned land that he wanted to buy. The two held different views and expectations regarding race, land ownership, and regional culture.

A return migration theme found in the PUMS data is that many younger return
migrants are not born in the South. Such migration is, however, return migration in that these young returnees are connected to a larger family system that has its homeplace in the rural South. The brief period in which Dorothy cared for her grandson Eric is an example of this familial pattern.

Another theme in black return migration to the rural South that arises from Dorothy’s story was identified in Carol Stack’s work (1996) in the Carolinas. Stack observed that the return migration decision often occurred when the lives of the actors involved reached a point of crisis. The crisis manifests itself geographically as an element of life history. When the individual’s life becomes unmanageable or is in acute disarray, that person often looks to a point in his or her past when things made sense. For many black return migrants, that historical point is linked to a place. In this study, that place is the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Mrs. Scott’s life reached crisis through her experience of violence and social decay in Chicago. In this sense her notion was that the last place in which she felt safe was at home in the Delta.

As we discuss above, the Great Black Return Migration led to a return migration, in part, because many migrants kept close ties to the South. Mrs. Scott maintained her attachments to the Mississippi Delta over the years as she expanded her land holdings in Sunflower County. More importantly, Dorothy’s life testifies to these place ties through her marital situation in which she and Ruffin lived apart, she in Chicago and he in the Mississippi Delta. Mrs. Scott returned often to the South to be with her husband. This theme of continuing ties between migrants and their homeplace is exhibited explicitly in Dorothy’s geographic life history.

Black return migration to a place like the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is difficult to reconcile and understand. Why are African Americans returning to this region of economic stagnation and grim racial history? What are the emergent themes found among its participants? These questions are difficult to answer with census data. Though the data are necessary to illuminate the return migration process, they do not address the more difficult questions mentioned above. We believe that this migration is a homeplace migration and that stories like Mrs. Dorothy Mae Scott’s bring context and meaning to a significant geographic process. We hope that by combining empirical data and ethnographic methods, we have brought a degree of understanding to a puzzling migration story.

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