“No Such Thing as Stand Still”: Migration and Geopolitics in African American History

Kendra T. Field

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 search for, in Nell Painter’s words, “real freedom.” As an adolescent, he witnessed the removal of federal troops from the South, the brisk evaporation of African American political and economic opportunities (including the coerced removal of approximately two thousand black legislators and officeholders), and the denial of African American personhood across the region. His early life was marked by unfathomable disillusionment. As an adult, he dreamed of Africa, participated in several emigration movements, and served as a lieutenant in Chief Alfred Charles Sam’s 1913–1915 back-to-Africa movement. Elic Davis finally made it to Africa “on his own” by the time he was in his early fifties. A few years after his arrival, around 1920, he wrote to his daughter, telling her that he was sick and hoped to return to America. Lomie Davis recalled that “he wrote to me to come and help him.” Living in Texas at the height of Jim Crow, Lomie tried her best to obtain a loan to reach him. “Well I, I had sixty dollars. And I went to the bank. And I tried to get the money to go. And they told me they couldn’t.” She added, “That was all I knew to do.” No one heard from Elic again. Lomie believed he passed away in West Africa shortly thereafter.1

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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 activity that has yet to make a lasting mark on the historiography of the period that Rayford Logan called “the nadir” of African American experience in the United States. In his lifetime, Lomie’s father migrated from northeast Mississippi to the delta hinterlands of the “all-black” town of Mound Bayou, from the delta to Indian Territory, and from Oklahoma to West Africa. Along the way, he also ventured to New York City, Chicago, and, possibly Jamaica. Notwithstanding Lomie Davis’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 repeatedly “voted with their feet,” creating constant movement that spanned “domestic” and “foreign” destinations across the American South and West, Mexico, Canada, and West Africa, long before the first steps of the Great Migration. Historians have tended to enter this subject through individual movements instead of individual lives, and few have studied in detail the critical connections between these movements—especially what Steven Hahn has called the “close connection” between continental and overseas migrations. This collective response to the demise of Reconstruction has been frequently dismissed as demographically insignificant, regionally specific, or otherwise exceptional; moreover, the public history of the postemancipation era remains strikingly static until the Great Migration. 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.”

In this article, I explore the intricacies of Chief Sam’s little-known back-to-Africa movement and recover the history of the migrants who created it. One hundred years ago, Sam and his followers set sail on the ss Liberia for the Gold Coast. Sam’s movement began in Oklahoma, an American borderland at the turn of the twentieth century, and ended on the western coast of Africa during World War I. Its roots, however, stretched across the American South and back through the transatlantic slave trade. I use the story of one family of freedpeople—Elic Davis and his cousin Monroe Coleman—to argue that this back-to-Africa movement was not only a prelude to Garveyism and the Great Migration but also a capstone to what Carter G. Woodson once called “a century of negro migration” within and beyond North America.

More specifically, my analysis documents an indelible link between the western and Liberia migratory movements and illuminates their common ground. That so many westward migrants attempted to move decisively beyond the borders of the United States af-

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3 Carter G. Woodson, A Century of Negro Migration (Washington, 1926).
ter Oklahoma statehood (1907) underscores my argument that African Americans were initially drawn to Indian Territory partly by the territory’s momentary status as a political and economic space on the margins, if not beyond the bounds, of U.S. oversight. Thus, this story reveals early Oklahoma 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.” My work also situates the Sam movement within the long transition from slavery to freedom and the gradual emergence of American biracialism—what Jean Toomer called “the hypnotic division of America into black and white.” In short, the development of this little-known movement complicates notions of the quintessential domesticity and biracialism of the nadir, revealing instead the deeply transnational and multiracial dimensions of freedom’s first generation. This story illuminates the simultaneous, painstaking construction of nation and race that undergirded the rise of American power at the turn of the twentieth century.4

In the century since the Liberia set sail, the Sam movement has received sporadic scholarly attention, either crediting Sam as a forgotten precursor to Marcus Garvey’s Black Star Line steamship company or illustrating the tragedy of Sam’s “utterly desperate group of people.” My research—the first to move beyond the charismatic leader and his nameless, faceless followers to detail the individual lives of participants—reveals that this movement was anything but an “ephemeral flash.” While these migrants produced “early rumblings” of twentieth-century emigration—including the Great Migration and modern repatriation—many of Sam’s participants had migrated two and three times into the southwest American borderlands before joining this back-to-Africa movement. Throughout, they retraced enslaved peoples’ antebellum paths, echoing the lore of national and transnational journeys lit by the North Star.5

This article bridges stories too often classed as domestic or international. In fact, the present designations may have been somewhat unfamiliar to turn-of-the-century migrants of the southwest borderlands, a region shaped by competing sovereignties and with no clear path to incorporation into the United States. Building on the powerful contributions of Steven Hahn and Michele Mitchell on African American politics and peoplehood


in the postemancipation era, I suggest that we understand turn-of-the-century Indian Territory and Africa as part of a continuum of flight from the late nineteenth-century United States and that we begin to view Nell Painter’s “exodusters” and Tony Martin’s Garveyites in a single transnational frame, to hear “Liberia” and “Oklahoma” in a single breath. As the freedman J. W. Turner wrote in 1892, “the peoples are Greatly stirred up in this country about Oklahoma . . . but we are bound for [Liberia].” This article reimagines the postemancipation period as a series of unbound migrations, deepens the roots of the Great Migration, and highlights the centrality of migration and geopolitics in African American history. 

Like many of those African Americans who dreamed of and occasionally journeyed to Africa, the rural black southerners who participated in Chief Sam’s back-to-Africa movement are “men and women whose names and struggles have been lost to history”—but not entirely lost. Frequently their stories were passed on to children and grandchildren, and were sometimes distorted along the way. As a child, I often heard my grandmother say, “Grandpa [Coleman] 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.

I have located the connections among these various migrations by entering the Sam movement 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 two principal migrants I introduce here: my great-great-grandfather Monroe Coleman and his first cousin Elic Davis. I heard stories about Grandpa Coleman as a child, but nearly three decades passed before I returned to them in earnest. While the questions I pursued have frequently diverged from those that most interest familial descendants, genealogists, and local historians, I have increasingly found ways to appreciate the stakes of these divergent perspectives. History may be “the enemy of memory,” as Richard White has written, but “there are regions of the past that only memory knows.”

“South Gold Coast” and the Transnational Nadir

Lomie Davis was about seventeen when her father moved the family from Salt Creek, Oklahoma, to a nearby “tent city” in Weleetka, in November 1913. After only a few years in Oklahoma, they joined hundreds of African Americans who had hastily “disposed of their property” and prepared to set sail for the Gold Coast. By the first week of December, the Wewoka and Lima (Oklahoma) Courier reported “not less than 50,000 vacant farms and

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7 Campbell, Middle Passages, xxi.

houses throughout our eastern section,” as a result of “the people selling out getting ready to go to Africa on the 15th of Dec.” Fifty thousand was an exaggeration, but certainly “hundreds” were residing “in tents near Weleetka and in other parts in order to be ready to pack up on short notices.” The vast majority of these were “born farmers,” said a correspondent for the African Mail; accustomed to raising cotton, corn, and rice, many were “good ranchmen” and had managed “horses, mules, and the plough from their early years.” Repeated postponements of the trip meant that by January 1914, food was becoming scarce and the migrants were ill-prepared for freezing temperatures; nevertheless, most “shivered through the cold winds of the Oklahoma winter,” J. P. Owens, the son of one participant, recalled. Although the ship was still delayed in New York City at the end of the month, the Wewoka and Lima (ok) Courier reported, “There are hundreds who have not despaired of the ship sailing nor languished in the hope of seeing the promised land.” These hopeful migrants named their temporary camp South Gold Coast.9

Several months earlier, on a Thursday night in October, more than one thousand men and women had gathered outside the First Baptist Church in Weleetka, Oklahoma. As

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the opening prayer service began, the Wewoka and Lima (ok) Courier reported, “one could hear all over the assemblage, yes, let us get ready for the exodus.” When Chief Sam rose to speak, the crowds pushed toward him, trying to touch his clothing. He spoke of “the conditions of the negroes in America,” the grim details of which were well known to listeners; according to an American correspondent for the African Mail, these included “lynchings, disfranchisements, peonage, segregation in church, school, and public careers”—all had “embittered the lives of Negroes.” Sam then spoke of “the golden opportunities that awaited them at Gold Coast Africa,” saying that there was “plenty of room in Africa for the American Negro” and that they would “go home and build up a powerful kingdom.”

This was new: information about Africa from an African, let alone an “African chief.” Especially since the demise of Reconstruction, African American men and women across the South expressed a renewed interest in Africa, and many were ready to go, if only they could access reliable information about the place and the resources to get there. Would-be migrants formed hundreds of local emigration clubs, writing time and again to the American Colonization Society (acs) in the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s, enclosing stamps or money orders for “25 cts,” requesting copies of the acs publication African Repository (later the African Bulletin), “printed matter,” or simply “information” about Liberia and occasionally other parts of Africa; in so doing, they remade this antebellum organization in their image as freedpeople. In the early 1890s, the acs reported, “a careful estimate . . . shows that one million or more of the people of color are seriously considering the matter of an early change of residence from the United States to Africa.” In particular, the number of letters coming from Oklahoma skyrocketed after statehood, and the state soon became the new heart of “Liberia fever.” In the ninety years since the founding of the acs, surviving records suggest that the epicenter of excitement had moved westward in two waves, first from the antebellum Carolinas to the post-Reconstruction delta (especially Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana), and on to Indian Territory and Oklahoma during the first decade of the twentieth century. In the three years immediately after Oklahoma statehood, the number of letters written to the then-obsolete acs that originated in Oklahoma (fifty), while a far cry from nineteenth-century numbers, nearly equaled the number coming from all the other U.S. states combined (sixty-two); meanwhile, thousands of letters circulated throughout the emerging black press, and more were written directly to ship-building companies. Those written to the acs asked for “the terms upon which the society will furnish transportation.”

The acs no longer had the capacity to furnish transportation to any of the tens of thousands interested in migrating; following the crises of 1892—in which hundreds of


The 1913–1915 back-to-Africa movement ostensibly led by Chief Alfred Charles Sam, shown here circa 1910, was in fact a partnership between African American emigrationists and West African missionaries and entrepreneurs. Courtesy James Anquandah.

impoverished African Americans from Oklahoma and Arkansas arrived in New York City mistakenly expecting passage to Liberia—the ACS had lost much of its remaining credibility and funding. It still had, however, “printed matter,” especially the *Liberia Bulletin*. Also circulating throughout the South was the *African League*, published in Liberia by J. H. Green, a former Mississippi editor who had migrated with his printing press at the request of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop and emigrationist Henry McNeal Turner, by then a familiar face to black Oklahomans. So it was around 1912 in the tiny black farming settlement of Mantee, Oklahoma, that Peter J. Dorman, a young black doctor from South Carolina and president of the local emigration club, could be found reading a recent issue of the *African League* when he came across an Akim Trading Company advertisement for “Agricultural Lands in Africa and How to Obtain Them.” Dorman composed a letter to the company’s founder, “Chief Sam,” asking for “information concerning conditions in the chief’s country.”

Born in 1879 or 1880 in Akim Swedru, Gold Coast, Sam was educated at the Basel Evangelical Mission Day School at Kyebi. As a young adult, amid an economic boom

driven by cocoa production and a minor gold rush, Sam shifted away from his career as a missionary to become a produce trader of cocoa and crude rubber. Yet he remained deeply enmeshed in a transnational network of African, African American, and white American missionaries that included the AME Church in Liberia as well as the Holy Ghost and Us Bible School in Shiloh, Maine. These friends may have shaped and assisted his first visit to the United States in 1910 and the 1911 establishment of his trading company in New York City. At least one of the African AME missionaries in Liberia was on the company’s board. When he returned to the Gold Coast, Sam acquired African shareholders, a plot of land, and made plans to trade West African resources such as cocoa, mahogany, and rubber. While his original interest lay in trade, however, Sam mentioned land in his 1912 newspaper advertisement, which caught the eye of black Oklahomans who were quickly being dispossessed of their landholdings in the new state. The migrants sought the Gold Coast for “protection under the laws of the country,” said the African Mail, and the “vast opportunities” available “for the development of the natives and themselves.” Dorman’s letter expanded Sam’s pan-African interest. According to an American correspondent for the African Mail, Sam brought the letter to “several chiefs,” who recalled “the history of the Negroes’ expatriation” and “their blood relationship,” and invited “those who wished to accept their hospitality.” When Dorman received Sam’s affirmative reply—at last, “reliable information”—he and his neighbors “lost no time to scatter the news among the people.” In May 1913 Sam stepped off the train in Wetumka, Oklahoma, and headed “nine miles through the country” to the small community of Mantee. Dorman and his neighbors welcomed Sam, and there the “African movement” began in earnest with a four-hour meeting, in which sixty-four black Oklahomans joined the cause.13

Among these were Elic Davis, his brother Moses (who, Orishatukeh Faduma reported, paid “the first 50 dollars in it”), and his cousin Monroe Coleman. Although Coleman had founded the small farming community of Mantee just a few years prior, he was about to become a “well-known financier” of an international emigration movement. In a parallel transformation, by the time Davis walked through the doorway of the Weleetka First Baptist Church several months later, the life of this country preacher had been changed forever. As he stood listening, Davis heard Sam describe himself as “the Moses that has come to deliver them.” If people chose not to come, Sam said, they could “stay here and die in the wilderness.” Bridging various religious denominations, those that stood to speak would have emphasized a common dream, as did one Wewoka and Lima (ok) Courier reporter, “to plant manhood and justice into the unborn” or “to rise up and call us blessed.” Before the close of the Weleetka meeting, the Wewoka and Lima (ok) Courier reported, Elic Davis walked toward the pulpit where Sam had stood. There, he sang “a good old song,” which “brought tears and great hallelujah by the delegates.” Perhaps at that moment, as he looked out across the glistening faces of one thousand devotees (who could scarcely fit in the room), Davis decided to sell his belongings and move his family into a tent at South Gold Coast. The “tent city” where they would live for much of the year may have resembled those constructed two decades prior, in the land runs that fa-

cilitated the initial African American migration to the state. The South Gold Coast “tent city” may have also resembled the place where thousands of black Oklahomans would be forced to live through the winter of 1921, after the burning of their homes, property, and loved ones by armed white Oklahomans in the Tulsa riot.\textsuperscript{14}

Meanwhile, Coleman prepared to travel with Sam to New York to locate and purchase a ship. Within a day of the October church service, they had taken up a collection of six thousand dollars, largely in twenty-five-dollar shares. Following a series of rallies throughout Okfuskee County (many communities with black majorities), the company was “capitalized at $1,000,000”; “6,300 men and women, mostly Southern negroes, have bought shares and are ready to go.” Chief Sam urged them “to unite in a union of confidence and Christian love,” and to “start to Africa free upon their own ship.” “They have sold their farms in Oklahoma, packed their goods and are ready to go to Africa for the rest of their lives,” wrote one reporter for the \textit{New York Sun}. They planned to “build model cities, have large farms, and establish a form of government of their own.” In the spirit of racial uplift, reporters noted that “the stockholders are all negroes,” highlighting the movement’s independence from white capital. Chief Sam was “looked upon by the hundreds who have bought shares as a leader who will deliver them from all ‘Jim Crow’ regulations.” Delegates would later be found by reporters “having a religious meeting in the dining saloon of the ship” and “singing negro camp meeting hymns.” Sam’s political and religious vision stood alongside a commercial one. “After we land our immigrants,” the company’s business agent A. E. Smith told a reporter for the \textit{New York Sun}, “we will then tear out the partitions and load the ship with African products such as goat skins, mahogany, cocoa beans, rubber, coffee, and ostrich feathers. These products will be brought to this country where I have already found markets.” Throughout the fall of 1913 black Oklahomans carefully considered the righteousness of the movement, debating in the \textit{Wewoka and Lima (OK) Courier} pages the legality of the path—“What we want is a definite understanding of the contract”—and the providential spirit of the movement—if there were “substantial grounds to argue a negro inheritance or secular sovereign” in “the land of Africa.” By Thanksgiving “men of noble rank”—dozens of lawyers, schoolteachers, and “every profession”—who had previously “had their heels against” Chief Sam had been “converted to the project.” By January 1914 the group had purchased an old German ship for $69,000, and it was undergoing thousands of dollars in repairs, including the installation of wireless communication believed essential in the wake of the \textit{HMS Titanic} sinking two years prior.\textsuperscript{15}

Indeed, the movement’s “delegates” included, according to the \textit{Gold Coast Leader}, “distinguished Afro-Americans,” such as Dr. Peter J. Dorman, “who was in full practice in the States” and had volunteered as “ship’s doctor.” Another, “the aged Mr. Garret,” was described as “a highly respected man in his State” and a veteran of “the Emancipation war.” M. A. Sorrell


was a “successful lawyer” and justice of the peace in the “all-black” town of Boley. While he initially tried Chief Sam for disturbing the peace in Boley, Judge Sorrell later emerged as the “ship’s purser,” while W. H. Lewis, a graduate of Fisk University, “volunteered as second mate.” Rounding out the list of high-profile Oklahoma delegates were “a goodly number of sound business men,” including “Messrs. Coleman, Langhorn, and Parker, the well-known financiers.” Responding to rampant attacks on the movement and claims of fraudulence, the Gold Coast Leader emphasized that such judges and doctors “can hardly be regarded as adventurers in quest of fortune.” By the spring of 1914 the movement’s newspaper, the African Pioneer, was up and running, and both Davis and Coleman, with hundreds of other black Oklahomans, had moved their families directly to Galveston Island, Texas—some living in makeshift tents, others boarding with locals—to await their ship.16

The presence of South Gold Coast, Oklahoma, enboies the relationship between continental and overseas movement, expanding views of black emigrationism and nationalism. It highlights the misguided tendency among U.S. 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 the historian Steven Hahn has put it. Scholars have rested too easily on present-day, fixed categories of “foreign” and “domestic,” failing to see the long-standing middle ground that was the American Southwest at the turn of the twentieth century—those parts of early Oklahoma that were in some ways as “foreign” as West Africa. For most of the period, as in the Gold Coast, white and black settlers could not own land in Indian Territory; many married Indian and black Indian women squatted on collectively held Indian lands or worked for Indian landlords until the early twentieth century. The presence of this middle ground supports Hahn’s suggestion that the western and Liberia movements were probably “manifestations of a more general and remarkably widespread impulse,” or what Michele Mitchell calls “incipient forms of black nationalist thought.” Even rural African Americans who had little exposure to antebellum (elite) pan-Africanism engaged “the notion of becoming a ‘race,’ a ‘people,’ a ‘race of people,’ or a ‘nation.’” More specifically, Mitchell has noted, “African American people associated freedom with territory”; this was of a piece with larger global patterns of migrating laborers at the turn of the twentieth century but also “a relatively unique phenomenon, if not a delayed reverse migration of a people rented by the Atlantic slave trade generations earlier.” Raised in what Wilson Moses called “the golden age of black nationalism,” increasingly on the margins of American cities, towns, and states, these men and women sought a place apart.17

Between 1890 and the admission of Oklahoma to the United States in 1907, African Americans entered Indian Territory by the tens of thousands, and the African American population nearly quadrupled; their presence quickly overwhelmed the numbers of African-descended Creeks and the Indian population as a whole. E. L. Fisher noted that around 1890 “the Territory began to be developed very rapidly, people came fast; homes were built; farms cleared and broken out; railroads were being built; townsites were laid out.” Just a few years prior, however, white and black settlers alike were considered “intruders” on these lands. Fred Brown, who came in from Texas in 1886, recalled, “I ran

16 “At Last!” “The African Movement,” African Mail (Liverpool), Nov. 27, 1914, p. 82.
about seven thousand head of cattle. Of course, it was under an Indian, for everyone who held cattle had to be under an Indian. In fact everything was under Indian control at that time. Hick Harrison was our Indian. He claimed all land or had charge of it.” Meanwhile, Coleman’s neighbor, Thomas Jefferson Brown—born in 1850s Arkansas to an African American man and an Irish woman—entered “I.T.” (Indian Territory) and married twice to African American descendants (including former slaves) of the Creek and Seminole nations, securing over one thousand acres of land, a school, a church, and a post office, shaping within the region a distinct black and Creek settlement, known as “Brownsville.” The Brown family history included the presence of Native Americans as slave owners, and African Americans as settlers on Indian land. Indeed, by 1900, there were more than three times as many non-Indians as Indians in Indian Territory. The African American population had grown to more than eighty thousand before Oklahoma statehood. Letters to the 19

In other words, scholars might root twentieth-century African emigration in the longer durée of Indian Country, in Miles and Holland's words, as “open and even marginal space, a psychic territory where black subjects find safety, solace, autonomy, and family.” As Robin D. G. Kelley has noted, African Americans “searched outside the United States for political allies and often sought connections with North America’s colonized people—the Native Americans.” Of course, as Miles and Holland urge, “words like ‘family’ and ‘community’ often conjure a romance of past and present” that is defied by reality. Promoters envisioned “a place where Indians were necessary but peripheral.” In the name of racial uplift, the vast majority of the celebrated “all-black” towns of Oklahoma were, in fact, built upon Indian allotments and were publicized by motivated white railroad investors who hired African American men as town promoters to recruit black southerners; twenty-four of twenty-eight black towns emerged within Indian Territory (not Oklahoma Ter-

ritory). The first issue of the Boley (ok) Progress stated the newspaper’s mission as serving “homeseekers and colored capitalists . . . who desire cheap homes, unrestricted privileges, and paying investments, [with] information pertaining to the advantages possessed by Boley.” Soon the Boley (ok) Progress equated moving to this black town in the Creek nation with the Pilgrims’ search for freedom. In 1908, one year after Oklahoma statehood, Booker T. Washington wrote that “Boley . . . represents a dawning of racial consciousness, a wholesome desire to do something to make the race respected; something which shall demonstrate the right of the negro, not merely as an individual, but as a race, to have a worthy and permanent place in the civilization that the American people are creating.” And yet, he added, “Boley, although built on the railway, is still on the edge of civilization. You can still hear on summer nights, I am told, the wild notes of the Indian drums and the shrill cries of the Indian dancers among the hills beyond the settlement.” In this sense, the concept of a black Indian Territory, Miles and Holland have noted, “transformed Indians into a vehicle for black identity formation and racial uplift.” Though for much of the twentieth century “the black flight to Oklahoma, like the movement to Africa at the same time,” was often framed as a simple “response to white racism,” recent scholarship reveals that black migrants were engaged in modern nation building, including vibrant debates, as David Chang has written, over where the nation might be “at home.” 19

If, as Claude Clegg has powerfully suggested, African Americans in West African colonies sometimes “gained their liberty through forfeiting the freedom, property, and lives of others,” so they did in Indian Territory. These African Americans could “demonstrate their fitness” for national inclusion, even as it functioned as a space, to some degree, outside of the nation. Having chosen for a debate the question of whether African Americans should “celebrate George Washington’s birthday,” Boley’s Union Literary Society “decided in the negative.” Black towns were emblematic of this pervasive tension between national fitness and expatriation, proximity and distance. Yet even as black southerners gravitated to this “pretty country” that “the Negroes own”—as the Boley town poet “Uncle Jesse” added, “with not a single white man here to tell us what to do”—others were forming “Africa Societies” and preparing to leave for Africa. As A. G. Belton wrote in 1890 from Mississippi to the acs, “We as a people believe that Africa is the place but to get from under bondage we are thinking of Oklahoma as this is our nearest place of safety.” After Oklahoma statehood, when such migrants “picked up” yet again, this time for the Gold Coast, they were, in the words of the movement theologian Orishatukeh Faduma, “African Pioneers”: “They know what the life of pioneers means in a new country. They have counted the cost, and have been prepared by years of suffering and injustice, and by years of en-

durance, to attempt what others have attempted to do in the history of the struggles of the human race for self development and freedom of the soul.” The haunting coalescence of freedom and settler imperialism in “pioneering” is thus part of the common ground shared by black continental and overseas emigration in the postemancipation period.20

Passing for Black: Jim Crow and the Multiracial Nadir

As much as the movement reveals the transnational dimensions of the nadir, so it reveals its multiracial dimensions. Encompassing the lives of freedom's first generation, the story illuminates the gradual emergence of twentieth-century American biracialism. The construction and maintenance of the division between black and white required a great deal of ideological labor, especially the papering over of historical fractures—between enslaved and free African Americans, and among white slave owners, traders, and yeoman farmers—within each of these emerging communities. The emergence of white and black racial nationalism obscured a more complex past. As Joseph Roach has written, “the relentless search for the purity of origins is a voyage not of discovery but of erasure.” The migratory pasts of Monroe Coleman and Alexander Davis—first cousins of disparate backgrounds who together joined the Sam movement—reveal the rapid rise of racial nationalism among turn-of-the-century African Americans.21

Born in 1869 to a freedwoman and her former slave owner, and identified by census takers as “mulatto,” Coleman had migrated to Indian Territory at the turn of the twentieth century, drawn by the recent growth of black towns and settlements. Having been kept on to run the farm on behalf of the widow of his mother’s owner, Coleman appears to have been favored within the planter family, at least for a time. As he grew into adulthood and Reconstruction came to a halt, however, and as political and economic opportunities for freedpeople quickly evaporated, Monroe left the Coleman plantation to make his own way in a post-Reconstruction world. In the face of political and economic exclusion, and widespread racial violence and harassment, many advantages previously ascribed to “mulatto” men and women, including the children of former slave owners, also disappeared. Still, financial support sometimes accompanied those who quietly moved away from their white fathers during this tumultuous period.22


Around 1904, responding to contemporary popular literature of Indian Territory as a “Paradise” and “a free country,” Coleman and his large family “came by train,” his grandchildren repeatedly boast (hinting at their grandfather’s relative status or connection to wealth). Perhaps Coleman had heard about economic opportunities in the Creek nation, such as the Abe Lincoln Trading Company, led by “all Negro men of fair business ability . . . and new settlers in the Creek Nation.” Most important, in the wake of Indian allotment, Coleman would have heard it was a place where one could easily get “a free home”—that is, land. Certainly, the search for “free” land motivated many white and black migrants alike; in the case of black and “mulatto” migrants of some means, such as Coleman, it was also the search for inalienable land, which would not be threatened by growing racial animus. Upon arrival, Coleman purchased a plot from the ten-year-old Creek freedman Washington “Wash” Bruner, an increasingly common practice following federal allotment of Indian lands. Coleman and his family named their settlement Mantee, after their home community in Mississippi, and applied to the federal government for a post office. These are the oft-told stories of the “all-black” towns and prideful black community formation. A closer look reveals that this moment was undergirded, in Indian Territory, by the Americanization of transnational space, the disconcerting confluence of racism and settler imperialism, and intensive masculine pride.23

Participation in American expansionist policies and the settlement and cultivation of Indian land would not have been entirely new to Coleman and his fellow African American migrants. Indeed, Coleman learned and inherited his ambitions, ideals, and knowledge as the son of an enslaved mother but also as the son of a slave-owning father. Two generations before his birth, many of Monroe’s white antecedents had expressed a kindred desire to escape settled American society for the “Old Southwest” of Alabama and Mississippi. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted in 1835, “They have been told that fortune is to be found somewhere toward the west, and they hasten to seek it.” To secure their fortune, they forcibly removed nearly one million enslaved men and women, including Monroe’s mother, from the seaboard to the southern interior; these men and women did the massive work of clearing the land and preparing it for cotton planting. From the start, the white planters who settled the region were, in one historian’s words, “pioneers who owned other pioneers.”24

Thus, while most enslaved men and women were considered property for the duration of their lives, they nonetheless inherited a complex relationship to American national expansion. By the time Coleman and his peers arrived in Indian Territory in the late nineteenth century—as categories of “black” and “white” replaced “slave” and “free”—“mulatto” settlers such as Coleman folded themselves into a longer tradition of thriving “mixed-blood” entrepreneurs within the Indian nations, sometimes passing for Indian or white (as Coleman may have done when selling his vegetables in town); they were later


memorialized by descendants while other migrants struggled financially until the end. Ultimately, however, the (African)Americanization of transnational space—like most nationalism—obscured critical fractures within African American communities, including those that had historically separated Coleman from his cousin Alexander Davis.25

Before heading to Indian Territory, Coleman had stopped first in the Mississippi delta, following Elic Davis. Raised by the Colemans, Davis had moved his family to a farm near the “all-black” town of Mound Bayou, and then moved on, with Coleman, to the newly founded state of Oklahoma. Davis’s life experiences, however, were hardly identical to Coleman’s, and the Davis family was apparently aware of the distinction. Lomie Davis recalled her Coleman cousins: “Some of my relatives . . . in Mississippi . . . oh they were very wealthy. They didn’t pay attention to the rest of us. I don’t know how they got that way, but they was. . . . They seem to have gotten up in the world.” As a child, without the benefit of a white planter father—a critical factor in Coleman’s early life—Elic Davis was “sold” (most likely, apprenticed) after general emancipation (as was his neighbor Della Watkins, who would one day become his wife). Later, as a young man, while the Coleman boys were educated, Davis—living in the same home—worked, and, come nightfall, he would study his cousins’ schoolbooks.26

Whereas Coleman’s narrative of his migration to Indian Territory was celebratory, Elic Davis’s centered on fear and persecution in the delta. Davis’s family, which included Della and their eight young children, would spend five or six harsh years sharecropping in the delta before moving on to Indian Territory. Along the Sunflower River, near the “all-black” town of Mound Bayou, Lomie Davis recalled in painstaking detail, how exploitative the cotton business was for her family: “One time my father was on a farm. We made fourteen bales of cotton . . . and so my father said, ‘I guess we’ll go sell the cotton.’ And so this man says, ‘No. I sells the cotton.’ And he took all the cotton and sold it.” After that, Lomie recalled, “my father, he would maybe come home and he’d make us some mush out of cornmeal. . . . And that’s all we could have to eat . . . . I remember we had nothing but (cornmeal).” According to her nephew, “It was time to move on.”27

Just as Oklahoma entered the United States in the fall of 1907, the Davis family headed to the new state. With little property to its name, the family rented a one-room house with a kitchen in an attached tent. Elic and his family had been in Oklahoma for only six years when they moved to the tent city in Weleetka in 1913, readying themselves to leave the United States for Africa—from one “South Gold Coast” to another. But what years they were. In the months after Oklahoma’s statehood, Jim Crow laws were passed and policies were adopted to restrict African Americans from assembling and to impose segregation in housing, schools, and railroad cars; African Americans were effectively prohibited, by white supremacist policies and the constant threat of racial violence, from participating in state and local politics. Later that year, on Christmas Eve, James Garden was the victim of Oklahoma’s first African American lynching, and dozens followed over the next eight

25 Marzetta Brown Wesley and Odevia Brown Field described their grandfather Monroe Coleman and his neighbor Thomas Jefferson Brown as “very fair” and capable of “passing” in Indian Territory and early Oklahoma, if not for white, then for “mixed Indian,” or “creole.” Wesley and Field interview.
26 Reed conversation, 7, appendix A.
years; ironically, a decade earlier, in response to lynchings in Memphis, Ida Wells had urged her readers to “save our money” and head to Oklahoma, launching “the nation’s first antilynching movement.” At the same time, white Oklahomans began to limit African American access to land. In 1911, white farmers of Okfuskee County signed oaths pledging to “never rent, lease, or sell land in Okfuskee County to any person of Negro blood, or agent of theirs; unless the land be located more than one mile from a white or Indian resident.” That same year a mob of white Oklahomans had lynched a thirty-three-year-old woman, Laura Nelson, and her fourteen-year-old son, L. D. Mother and son were hanged together over a bridge while a large crowd of men, women, and children watched. Her “suckling babe” was left lying on the bridge until a neighbor picked her up. Perhaps not surprisingly, this bridge was just a few miles from the land that would soon become known as “South Gold Coast.” This was a far cry from the idea of Oklahoma as an “all-black state” for freedpeople—a proposition that Kansas state auditor Edwin McCabe had brought to President Benjamin Harrison for consideration just two decades prior.28

Moreover, hundreds of African Americans who had been former slaves of the Indian nations (and thus granted land allotments) or who had married into their families after emancipation, lost their landholdings, many of them oil-rich, in the years after statehood. As one Oklahoman commented to the Professional World, “Practically all the rich oil fields in this State were originally the property of Negroes. When the restrictions preventing the sale of freedmen’s lands were removed by Congress in 1908, it was the signal for wholesale robbery of these freedmen’s lands.” The loss of land and economic opportunities was accompanied by political exclusion; in 1910 the grandfather clause disfranchised the majority of African Americans in Oklahoma.29

Although he was not a landowner, Lomie Davis’s father was a political man. In the 1911 lead-up to the election of Oklahoma governor Lee Cruce (and in the wake of the 1910 grandfather clause), she recalled, her father was not allowed to attend local political meetings. Instead, Elic Davis “went to the meeting place and stooped beneath a window to listen. He heard someone say: ‘We’ll have to keep them Negroes down.’” Consequently, Elic retreated from his efforts “in getting blacks to go vote” and instead “turned more seriously to a new way.” During this time, descendants recall, this former sharecropper and country preacher traveled to Chicago, and possibly to Jamaica, in search of somewhere to move his family. In Lomie Davis’s words, her father would “just pick up.” “Lots of times, if there was some kind of business among the black people, something of importance, something to help them, they would always send him. He’d go to Chicago. He . . . went to Africa. . . . He would just pick up.”30


29 “Robbery,” 175.

30 Reed conversation, 13, appendix A-5.
In this willingness to “pick up,” Elic was not alone. More than one hundred thousand African Americans—most from the newly “redeemed” southern states—had migrated to Indian Territory and Oklahoma between 1890 and 1910, only to witness the rapid construction of a racial regime proudly modeled after the Jim Crow South. Mary Evans wrote to the ACS that “we have no home in Mississippi and we ain’t got no home in Indian Territory.” Displaced and disillusioned, the family groups and whole communities that migrated to Indian Territory between the 1880s and 1910 were soon searching again for a new destination. Several hundred black Oklahomans migrated in family groups to the Canadian plains of Alberta and Saskatchewan in the few years immediately following statehood; a few headed south for Mexico. Some doubled down on the “all-black” towns and settlements, and many began to revive older dreams of Africa. The emigrationist Bishop Henry McNeal Turner found a “ripe audience” in Oklahoma, scholars have suggested. Some soon sold their land for a lump sum, camped near railroad stations and “began a vigil” for the trains to New York City and the ships to Africa.31

Thus, when Chief Sam arrived in Oklahoma in the summer of 1913, inviting black farmers across the countryside to “become pioneers” and “cross the Atlantic,” Elic Davis and thousands of others heeded the call. As he listened to Sam speak at Weleetka First Baptist Church on that fall evening, Davis probably appreciated that Sam spoke “in plain language” and “without any modifiers”; a reporter for the movement called him “Christ-like . . . plainly dressed, kind and humble.” Perhaps Davis thought back to that first meeting in May and recalled that Sam did not go directly to the black doctors, teachers, and financiers of Tulsa (of the famed black Wall Street), nor to the professionals of Boley and other towns, but instead walked those “nine miles through the country” to their little farming settlement.  

Reporting on the influx of local refugees to the “tent city” and their devotion to the new movement, a Wewoka and Lima (ok) Courier reporter wrote that Sam “has a power of collecting more colored people into one unit than we have ever witnessed of any flock leader.” Another (perhaps the same) reporter encouraged followers to “lay aside factions”:

No need for us to carry church divisions, social strife into the land of Africa in the hope of God blessing us for he will not . . . . We as a race may often feel as individuals among our race, friendless, down trodden, an object of scorn and hate. But the only remedy to this is to stand pat for what you know is right regardless who it affects so long as you are under the guidance of God.

Color—ambiguously linked to questions of parentage, class, and proximity to slavery—was central to these divisions in Oklahoma. Bind together “every hue and color,” the Wewoka and Lima (ok) Courier urged, allowing “only principle” to be the basis “upon which one is received or rejected.” By contrast, two years prior, in Mississippi, the freedman Anderson Palmer had written to the acs asking for information about “home seekers fare” to Africa, declaring, “I am home bound . . . . The yellow and the mixed negroes don’t belong to me as a people. I am one of the tribes of Hebrews and now I am asking for healp and aide carry my mother and my self back home.” Indeed, many back-to-Africa movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been shaped, if not divided, by color and class. Part of what drew Sam’s followers “into one unit” was the construction of a new racial hierarchy in Oklahoma. In the end, an emigration movement that began, in part, in the spirit of national expansion ended as a powerful experience of racialized land loss and disfranchisement—for black, “mulatto,” and black Indian residents. The turn-of-the-century emergence of a global color line—experienced, for instance, in a vast wave of racialized land loss and disfranchisement, and consolidated, for instance, by the elimination of the category “mulatto” from the federal census after 1920—encouraged both Coleman and Davis to become “fastened in the colored group.”


“There is no steamship . . . owned by Negroes”: Unthinkable Movement at the Nadir

As the migrants in tents at South Gold Coast persevered through several months of freezing temperatures and an outbreak of smallpox during the winter of 1914, Booker T. Washington received a letter from a man named Tom Johnson. Writing from the town of Margaret, Alabama, about one hundred miles from Tuskegee, Johnson told Washington that he had read in the paper that “yo and Mr chief-Sam” were “caring the colored Peoples to Africa, to their own homes.” Johnson noted, “if it is true I wants to go my Self an four other familys. we or wating for an ancer from yo an then we or ready to go as soon as we get a ancer from yo.” Upon closing, Johnson added, “Please ancer at once. we will meet yo at any Place that yo say for us to meet yo.”

At the time that he received this letter, the fifty-seven-year-old Washington kept a busy schedule of speaking, fund raising, and various activities at Tuskegee Institute. Still the reigning African American voice at the turn of the twentieth century, Washington kept close watch over a variety of African American movements taking root across the United States. One of these was the Chief Sam movement that Johnson referenced in his letter. Yet Johnson was sorely mistaken about Washington's involvement in Sam's back-to-Africa plan. Instead, Washington had “employed an agent to spy upon and try to frustrate Chief Sam.” Not surprisingly, when Washington responded to Johnson a few weeks later, he began, “I write to say that I have no connection, whatever, with the scheme of 'Chief Sam' to carry a colony of Negroes from the South to Africa. Personally, I am not in favor of such a movement, for the reason that there are better opportunities offered to Negroes in this country than in any other country in the world; and my advice has always been that they remain in this country, and, as far as possible, in the South.”

During the same month, W. E. B. Du Bois spoke out publicly against the movement. In the February 1914 issue of the Crisis, the esteemed editor wrote, “The Oklahoma movement for migration to Africa is a poorly conceived idea and we warn our readers against it. Migration to-day is a serious matter and should be planned and financed on a large scale. It is foolish for individuals with small sums of money and no knowledge of the country to go to Africa. . . . Let the migration idea stop at present. Fight out the battle in Oklahoma and protect the masses against the charlatan who is stealing their money.” In closing, Du Bois added, “There is no steamship in New York building for the African trade and owned by Negroes, and the alleged African chief traveling in Oklahoma is nothing but a common cheat who belongs in jail.”

Certainly Du Bois had reason to doubt. At first glance, the migrants living at South Gold Coast in the winter of 1913–1914 would have resembled those hundreds of African Americans who had left Indian Territory and nearby Arkansas throughout the 1890s with dreams of an African return, only to find themselves stranded in rail cars and on the streets of New York City. Throughout the decade, according to the historian James Campbell, numerous “charlatans and confidence men” busily exploited the “frustration, despair, and desperate need” in the South under the auspices of African emigration. One
man claiming to be “Doctor Edward W. Blyden,” the renowned pan-Africanist, was in Arkansas collecting one dollar from each would-be emigrant during the summer of 1890. At the time, “the real Blyden was in Africa,” and the man in Arkansas was exposed as an imposter.38

Yet Sam was not, in the end, one more “swindler” in this succession of emigration leaders. In spite of rampant claims of fraudulence—including a steady stream from ministers, officials, and professionals of Boley who had a vested interest in people staying put—the U.S. and British governments were ultimately unable to find fault in his handling of the movement. Sam could frequently be heard discouraging followers from selling their homes or rushing to the camps until a second Atlantic passage was secured. Notwithstanding their refusal to wait, Sam’s followers shared with him a genuine vision for the future; they lived together—on and off the ship—for more than a year, weathering the attacks of the press, a harsh winter, and dwindling resources. As the movement’s agent commented in the New York Sun, “[I]f a 318-foot steamship, formerly the Curityba of the Munson Line, can be regarded as an earnest of Chief Sam’s intent to take American negroes to the gold coast of Africa, give them lots of land to farm and win huge profits for them by shipping their produce to the markets of the world, it may be said that the project is well under way.” Two leaders had “a personal interview” with the governor of Oklahoma, explaining the movement’s “raison d’etre.” As the Okfuskee County attorney wrote to Oklahoma governor Cruce, “If this is a swindle, it is open and above board, and there is nothing secret about it.”39

This is not to say that the Sam movement was without liabilities. The popular story of a charismatic charlatan papered over the near-perfect storm of structural barriers that the movement faced at every step. In addition to the material constraints of a grassroots movement of rural southerners—many former slaves—at the height of Jim Crow, the movement faced a series of governmental roadblocks extending from the Boley courthouse and the Oklahoma statehouse to the U.S. State Department and the offices of numerous British officials in London and the Gold Coast. So while some of the “delegates” who made it to the Gold Coast later blamed Sam for the governmental persecution, mounting debts, dwindling supplies, hunger, and illness they faced, there is little evidence that most felt duped by the individual. “Among the forty now quartered on the Curityba in Erie Basin are old mammies, who have sold their all out in the West that they may buy stock in Sam’s enterprise. There are negroes above the average in intelligence, who tell you they are engineers, ‘professors’ or editors of negro publications, who also have sunk their savings in the scheme. And for many weeks their faith in Sam remained unshaken.” After a conversation with the migrant W. H. Lewis about the availability of land, the New York Sun reported, “[T]he Oklahoma negroes . . . have been led to believe that the difficulty of getting land for colonization was overcome because Sam’s . . . tribe of Akim would adopt them as brothers and give them wide areas of land to build on and till as their own.” Another migrant urged caution: “Remember, some of us who shall embark for Gold Coast, will never put foot on American soil any more; then how careful ought we to be in this final step which

38 On African emigration “schemes” in the late nineteenth century, see Redkey, Black Exodus; Barnes, Journey of Hope; and Campbell, Middle Passages. Ibid., 124. [W. W. Meingault] to Coppinger, July 12, July 13, Aug. 13, 1891 (reel 152), box I: A295, Series I: Incoming Correspondence, 1819–1917, Records of the American Colonization Society.

may be marked its last time by death's signal.” In fact, upon their arrival in Saltpond, the migrants were welcomed by town leadership. Their resettlement plans were delayed, however, by colonial bureaucracy, land disputes, and dwindling resources. When interviewed in the 1970s, Nana Kurantsi III, chief of Saltpond at the time of the migrants’ arrival, cited food distribution, governmental taxes, and lodging among the challenges they faced. A great number died of influenza or malaria, while others scattered to cities along the coast, including Anomabo, Cape Coast, Accra, and Sekondi; some started and engaged in the production of tobacco, gunpowder, gin, and cocoa; some migrated to Liberia and Sierra Leone. Some who were forced to return to the United States nevertheless continued to believe in the idea of the “African movement.”

The movement was “unified” across religious denominations, color, and class; it included “well-known financiers” such as Coleman, and country preachers such as Davis. It included former slaves and the children of slave owners. The rhetoric of “racial destiny,” or, as Michele Mitchell has written, “incipient forms of black nationalist thought” helped paper over a more complex past. The emergence of twentieth-century biracialism eclipsed the category of “mulatto” in the U.S. census after 1910; from this point on, “one could only choose between the calcifying borders of whiteness and blackness.” Thus, by 1920, David Levering Lewis has noted, “almost half a million of the mulattoes counted in the 1910 census had ‘passed’ over into the white race during the intervening decade.” Others had left the country altogether, as in the case of Coleman, who mobilized his material and cultural relationship to whiteness and American expansion in the name of African American freedom.

So it was that in February 1914, instead of stumbling onto hordes of “desperate” migrants stranded in railway cars in Jersey City, New Jersey, or wandering a pier on the East River, reporters came upon a group of forty “delegates,” many of them professional men, on a steamship “owned by Negroes” and headed for Africa, at the height of Jim Crow. Both Coleman and “Rev. A. Davis” were on board the ship in Red Hook, Brooklyn, while it underwent repairs. When they returned to their families in the Galveston camp, perhaps Davis and Coleman tried to explain to their children what was happening, where they were going, and how far they had come. Five months later, on a rainy Thursday afternoon in July, days before departure, hundreds had paid the twenty-five-cent admission fee to board the Curityba, the steamship “owned by Negroes.” Having waited for months, the Galveston Daily News reported, men and women “lined the dock and crowded aboard, all in their Sunday best.” They “shook hands with each other and laughed and shouted and cried . . . sat in the deck chairs and touched the ship’s brasses lovingly. ‘Our ship,’ they called the Liberia.” On this day, Elic Davis spoke once more to the movement. As he looked out over the faces of Sam’s followers—and hundreds of others who had taken the train from Houston and beyond to get a glimpse of the famed


ship—Davis “spoke of the beginning of the movement.” Throughout the speech, “at short intervals,” Davis “paused and sang a snatch of song, the audience joining in the chorus.” For nine months, Davis had lived, eaten, slept, and worked alongside these men, women, and children, organizing Sam’s “disciples” in Galveston. Even so, when the Liberia set sail a few weeks later, Davis was not among them. The scouting party of “delegates” included Coleman, but Davis and his wife, Della, were made to stay behind, with promises of a “next trip.”

Elic and Della were still waiting in Galveston the following July 1915, when headlines of “Sam’s Bunch Starving” began pouring in through the Boley (OK) Progress and other black and white papers, with news that many had “passed into the Great Beyond” and that all “are broke.” By this time, at least five of the migrants were reported dead, and many others ill, as a wave of influenza swept through the Gold Coast. A few weeks later, a powerful hurricane hit Galveston. Winds of 120 miles per hour and a storm surge of up to sixteen feet caused severe flooding, resulting in the death of several hundred people, including Della. Several days later, her body was discovered, and she was buried in a

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In this 1905 photograph taken at Wall Street Pier in New York City, the Curityba (on the left) is docked next to the sidewheeler Nantasket (on the right). Purchased for $69,000, the Curityba would be christened the Liberia in 1914 by participants in the African movement.

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potter’s field in Galveston. For Elic, the summer of 1915 was full of tragedy. News of the “failed African venture” had arrived, and his companion of thirty-two years was found dead in the storm’s wreckage. In the years following Della’s death and the collapse of the Sam movement, Elic “continued to dream of Africa,” and in 1916, remarkably, left for the Gold Coast. Then, aside from his daughter, who received his letter pleading for help, no one ever heard from him again.43

In the last week of 1916, a “barnacle crusted vessel” was towed into Erie Basin at the end of an eight-hundred-foot line. “Pitted with rust” and “sticky with tropical mildew,” the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported, the *Liberia* returned to the same Brooklyn port, within three hundred feet of the place where it had first departed for Galveston nearly three years before. After “tossing many months at anchor off the African Gold Coast,” the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported, “the last chapter of the romance of an African negro’s dream of a black empire in Africa was closed.” This time around, “curious seafarers from all the ships at the Basin wandered over the *Liberia*’s deck tracing from what they saw the story of ‘King Sam’ and his voyage back to the land of black men, and they found the ship a veritable historical museum of the undertaking.” These visitors observed seats with “scaps of hymnals” and “inscribed with names of the colonists and the home towns in Oklahoma and Kansas which they had left behind.” Surely the place-name “Mantee” was carved on one of them. In the steward’s office they found “a moldy rubbed stamp, moldy stationery and twenty-three keys, the whole outfit lettered imposingly, ‘Ethiopian Steamship Line.’”44

Indeed, the “rusty ‘ark’” made quite a spectacle in December 1916, but this was nothing new. From Erie Basin in the winter of 1914 to Galveston Island in July, and on to West Africa, the *Liberia* had been a sight to see. As early as January 1914, when the delegates first left Oklahoma to “take charge of the vessel that is said to be bought by the African pioneers,” newspapers had anticipated the symbolic value of the ship, especially in the American South and in the eyes of former slaves and their descendants. In the words of a *Wewoka and Lima (OK) Courier* reporter, “When it leaves New York City, it will touch the landing points of Norfolk and Charleston on its way down. It is said thousands will be at these points to get a glimpse of the ship that was bought by the black man; and the ship that shall traffic with the other nations of the world . . . . When the ship does land in the harbor of Galveston there will be thousands to gaze thereon.” In the fall of 1913, as African Americans proverbially “turned inward” in the Jim Crow South, this unthinkable movement was underway. One year later, notwithstanding the movement’s ultimate collapse at the outbreak of World War I, the ship “owned by Negroes” had nevertheless made it “back home.” Years later, Du Bois himself revised his opinion of the movement, from a narrative of individual fraud to one of material constraints: “I beg to say just before the outbreak of the World War one of the minor chiefs of the English Gold Coast came to America . . . . His scheme was feasible and he was personally honest but he did not take into account the attitude of the British Government. . . . His boat was kept outside the harbor on various pretenses and not allowed

43 The *Boley (OK) Progress* reported based on letters received from migrants requesting support to return to the United States. George V. Perry, “Sam’s Bunch Starving!,” *Boley (OK) Progress*, July 16, 1915, p. 1; “Chief Sam’s Followers Are Starving to Deathl,” *Tulsa Star*, May 1, 1915, p. 1. Lomie (Davis) Reed’s interviewers noted that Della Davis’s lifespan paralleled that of Booker T. Washington (1856–1915). Reed conversation, 45n6, 13.

44 The *Brooklyn Eagle* story was reprinted in the *Kansas City Sun*. “The Latest from King Sam,” *Kansas City (MO) Sun*, Dec. 30, 1916, p. 4.
to land. Finally, the World War broke out before it had landed its cargo and the whole scheme naturally fell through.”

The spectacle of such a movement at the nadir was perhaps matched only by the appearance of the “all-black” towns of the same period. In the 1910s, in the last years of his life, Booker T. Washington was enthralled by these towns. In 1912 Washington wrote to Isaiah Montgomery that outside of Tuskegee there was “no community in the world” in which he was “so deeply interested” as Mound Bayou, Mississippi, the “all-black” town in the delta where the Davis and Coleman families had first migrated—and he expressed similar sentiments about Boley. In 1954 the historian August Meier

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noted that as African Americans turned toward “ideologies of economic advancement, self-help, and racial solidarity” amid the rise of Jim Crow, it is in the “all-Negro communities founded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (most extensively in Oklahoma) that we find this latter cluster of ideas institutionalized in its most radical form.” Ironically, Oklahoma’s “most radical form” of Washingtonian thought readied the new state to become, at the turn of the twentieth century, the primary locus of the African emigration movement that Washington decried. Moreover, Washington called attention to the common ground beneath westward and Liberia emigration movements when in 1912 he wrote, “Liberia . . . merely represented a widespread movement among Negroes, who had escaped slavery, to establish homes and communities of their own, not only in Africa but wherever freedom was assured them.” Not surprisingly, then, although he surveilled the Sam movement, Washington could do little to stop it from moving beyond U.S. borders. Among those shareholders on board the Liberia in the weeks leading up to its Galveston departure was “One colored woman, who said she was a graduate of Booker T. Washington’s school at Tuskegee.” Faduma, who joined expecting to become the movement’s “Principal of the College of Ethiopia in the Gold Coast,” modeled on Tuskegee, had written a letter to Washington in December 1913, hoping to visit his institute “for five days’ thorough examination of your methods.” In the end, perhaps Tom Johnson’s misguided assumption about “yo and Mr chief-Sam” was not so misguided after all. Indeed, the separatist impulse took many forms following the demise of Reconstruction, including both “domestic” town movement and “foreign” emigration; the two explicitly converged in turn-of-the-century Indian Territory and Oklahoma, almost predictably on the literal edge of the U.S. nation-state.46

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, what attracted African American migrants such as Coleman and Davis to Indian Territory was its image, the migrant George Coleman put it decades later, “as a place near the border of civilization.” In the middle of the American continent, in this lingering transnational space, these individuals pursued their claims to freedom via American expansion, American Indians, and the acquisition of Indian land. Several years later, facing the emerging constraints of Oklahoma statehood, federal Indian policy, and Jim Crow segregation, many of these migrants lost their land and the attendant mineral rights to white settlers and oil speculators. Landless migrants such as Davis, who moved and fought for political rights instead of land, lost just as much ground in the transition to statehood. In the end, economic opportunity and political rights proved equally elusive for African American migrants in Oklahoma. In the spirit of “racial destiny,” African Americans of diverse backgrounds and disparate means nevertheless increasingly

“fastened in the colored group,” and began to look again beyond the U.S. nation-state. Not incidentally, a decade following the collapse of the Sam movement, many of the families and communities that had sent Sam’s “delegates” to West Africa became ardent Garveyites, producing twenty-eight United Negro Improvement Association chapters by 1926—ranking Oklahoma eleventh of all states.47

Challenging the notion of a static and withdrawn African American political life at the turn of the twentieth century, African-descended peoples led remarkably 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—exemplified by the Chief Sam movement—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 also 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, amid the Civil War: “There is no such thing as stand still in this nineteenth century; you must progress backwards or forwards; the world is rushing on; he or they who will not move with her, must be crushed by her onward march.”48
