CENTERING RURALITY
Building Rural Theory in the Black Belt

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Urban Planning and Design,
Harvard University Graduate School of Design

by

Sarah Page

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Architecture in Urban Design

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centering RURALITY

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by:
Sarah Page

advisors:
Eve Blau
Stephen Gray
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Diagram of existing Urban Theory. Placed based theoretical works are interconnected and utilized to build broader understandings of urbanism.
Diagram of existing Rural Theory. Comparatively, rural theory is composed of fewer place-based studies which are dispersed across disciplines and are infrequently related across scales. Its overarching theories are not consistently connected to specific geographies.
Introduction
Throughout human history, the ever-increasing demand for energy and the resulting extraction beyond planetary capacity has led to ecological loss, food insecurity, and community displacement. In response, the design and planning disciplines have primarily sought solutions to climate change and social inequity within urban contexts, creating a seemingly endless body of research and spatial provocations which explore countless variations on the "clean, green, just, and sustainable city." While urban solutions are necessary, a larger body of work that includes multiple forms of settlement is required. Many of our greatest challenges are a result of human interactions with global ecological systems and land-based cycles of production and consumption. While extraction is heavily influenced by urbanism, it is typically practiced in rural space with rural labor and needs to be addressed accordingly.

As urgency increases to radically reorient our relationship with the earth and develop new forms of human habitation, planning, and design disciplines must expand our field of vision to include multiple forms of human habitation and acknowledge that landscapes "beyond the urban" also contain complex social, political, and economic systems that require specific forms of intervention. We must begin to grapple with not only the challenges presented by cities and urban concentration but also the opportunities – and the risks – arising from rural change and restructuring.

Despite a breadth of knowledge, design’s urban-centric focus has failed to produce a comprehensive rural spatial theory. While the pursuit of rural studies has provided valuable insights into non-urban contexts, rural-specific research is rarely spatialized and frequently polarized, leaving gaps and misrepresenting rurality as a homogenous space. Additionally, design and planning practice have consistently deployed tools and methods of implementation which were developed to address urban space within the rural – which beyond being ineffective, in many instances, have caused harm.

This thesis aims to develop a methodological framework for ‘rural design theory’ by analyzing the historic and contemporary development and lived experiences of communities in the Black Belt Region of the Southern United States.

FOCUS: Rurality

What’s Rural?

While challenging the categorization, casting, and associations of the terms ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ is central to the work of this thesis, developing a definition of ‘rural’ serves as an important basis for ongoing and evolving questions.

Within its origins in the English language, ‘rural’ emerged as an adjective linked to the Latin noun *rus*, meaning "an open area." 6 The adjective form was incorporated into several European languages to reference those areas outside of cities. ‘Rural’ has also been used as a noun to refer to people living in rural areas. The term ‘rurality’ came into use in the eighteenth century to refer to the “condition of being rural.” 7 In academic study, the term ‘rural’ tends to be preferred while still having its own biases and complexity; it is seen as more neutral and objective than terms such as ‘hinterland’ and ‘countryside.’ 8

The formal definition of the rural in administrative discourse is frequently limited but critical. National definitions of the rural vary widely, making quantitative comparisons difficult. The most common determinant when defining rurality is population, with over 118 national definitions using a population threshold. 9 Yet some utilize additional factors, including agricultural employment (37 definitions), infrastructure typologies (19 definitions), or services available (17 definitions). 10 The United States Census Bureau defines rurality in absence as “any population, housing or territory not in an urban area.” 11 In total, there are nine federally recognized rural definitions in the U.S., each painting a different socioeconomic picture of Rural America. 12

Beyond historic terminology and administrative definitions, this thesis builds on geographic scholars’ work to define multiple aspects of rurality. Beginning with theories of space developed by Henri Lefebvre 13, Keith Halfacree outlines a ‘three-fold’ model of rural space, 14 which serves as a framework for exploring

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8 Alternate terms are explored and critiqued further in Chapter 1.
10 Ibid
11 Ratcliffe, Michael, Charyllyn Burd, Kelly Holdor, and Alison Fields. n.d. “Defining Rural at the U.S. Census Bureau.” 8
14 Halfacree, K. H. 2006. “Rural Space: Constructing a Three-Fold Architecture.” In *Handbook of Rural...
INTRODUCTION

CENTERING RURALITY

rural is a relationship to place with a material effect

rural locality

relationships of the rural

representations of the rural

lives of the rural

academic

discourses

media

discourses

governmental

discourses

living in the rural

performing the rural

rural is a social construct

rural is a lived experience

Diagram of thesis definition of rural which builds off of previous models.

the complex relationships and dynamics that shape rurality as a concept, locality, and lived reality. While the facets outlined are intended to collectively comprise all elements of the rural, they do not represent a consistent and unified rurality. The tensions between each component drive the dynamism of rural space, enabling restructuring and ongoing debate. Michael Woods’s work builds off previous models by exploring rural discourses, practices, and the production and consumption of rurality.15

This thesis defines ‘rural’ as an evolving social construct that influences lived and spatial realities through the materialization of its context and relationship to place. Intentionally ambiguous, this definition validates conflicting narratives of ‘rurality’ but challenges discourses that limit rural practice or identity. Additionally, all forms of human habitation are included in this definition that retain their relationship to place. To give material and lived experience reference to this definition, the thesis aims to understand individual understandings of rurality in the Black Belt.

Relationship to Place

Relationships to place have varied manifestations and motivations between individuals. Many different conceptions of the bond between people and places – place attachment or ‘sense of place’ – have been hypothesized and studied. In “Place Attachment,” Altman and Low define ‘relationship to place’ as “the bind or connection that a person forms with a particular place, which is influenced by the meanings and emotions that are associated with place.” They argue that an individual or community’s relationship to ‘nature’ or their environment is shaped by a variety of factors, including physical, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions.16 Theorists have expanded on this work, exploring the dynamic and overlapping aspects of self-image and symbolic meaning created through the relationship between people and the environment.17 In addition to relationships to physical environments, place attachment includes social aspects of place, including residential and familial relationships,18 generational networks and

References:

histories, or social contracts and networks within a specific place. Combining environmental and social aspects of the relationship to place, Richard Hay proposed a typology of place attachments, including:

- Superficial: lacking social connection and often aesthetic in nature, common within landscape tourism
- Partial: part-time residents of a particular system
- Personal: relationship to place developed outside of strong social networks
- Ancestral: people who are born, raised, and remain in a specific place or environment
- Cultural: deep, emotional, stable, and socially grounded connection, characteristic of Indigenous relationships with traditional land

Based on this thesis’s definition of rurality and understanding of relationship to place, rural identity, and experience can occur in a vast array of geographies and are not confined to space based on a qualitative list of determinants. According to this understanding, rurality can be practiced within dense urban fabrics and can be absent from the most ‘remote’ locations. This thesis explores rurality in the Black Belt Region to understand how individuals and communities identify with their environment and how design and planning practices facilitate and limit these relationships.

**Rural Idyll**

One of the most powerful perceptions of the rural is that of the ‘rural idyll,’ which imagines rural space to be a place of peace, tranquility, and simple virtue, but more importantly, a place that does not exist. The overly romanticized view of rurality is often contrasted with negative aspects of the city, offering an alternative.

This casting of the ‘rural idyll’ is not new, as representations of the idyllic countryside date back to the earliest writing about the rural. However, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as Europe and North America...
became increasingly urbanized and industrialized, the rural idyll gained popularity and became associated with an escape from modernity. There are many different rural idioms in practice, with different cultural and moral emphases and different pictorial representations. Ideas of the visual manifestation of the rural idyll vary by region and are often closely tied to ideas of national identity. Over time, the idyll has been created and utilized for political means, which fed on discourses of anti-urbanism, agrarianism, and the ‘pastoral myth.’ The media and Hollywood have also played a key role in reproducing ideas of the rural idyll and facilitating its global diffusion. The rural idyll is also reproduced through art, literature, poetry, and music and is an idea that is pervasive in popular culture.

The rural idyll is a normative concept, constructing rurality in a certain way rather than representing the rural that exists. This misrepresentation has often caused material harm in rural communities. The rural idyll has influenced political deals and government policies, often disguising the harsh realities of rural life, including poverty, prejudice, and environmental problems. Frequently the myth has disguised the scale and complexity of the connections between the rural and the urban, further casting rural space in service of production as a source of food, fuel, and building materials, ripe for extraction with little to no consequence. Additionally, the rural idyll has discouraged academic study of the rurality, presenting rural areas as passive, unchanging, and ahistorical, making them less relevant for academic study. The rural idyll also reinforces the idea that rural areas are homogeneous, with little diversity or complexity, further reducing the perceived value of studying rural areas in depth. This can lead to a lack of attention and funding for rural research and scholarship, which in turn can contribute to a lack of understanding of the social, economic, and political issues facing rural communities. The rural idyll is created by multiple actors, which are often urban residents resulting in narratives of rurality that have been imposed on rural time, the idyll has discouraged academic study of the rurality, presenting rural areas as passive, unchanging, and ahistorical, making them less relevant for academic study. The rural idyll also reinforces the idea that rural areas are homogeneous, with little diversity or complexity, further reducing the perceived value of studying rural areas in depth. This can lead to a lack of attention and funding for rural research and scholarship, which in turn can contribute to a lack of understanding of the social, economic, and political issues facing rural communities. The rural idyll is created by multiple actors, which are often urban residents resulting in narratives of rurality that have been imposed on rural and communities from the outside. Even as many versions of the idyll exist, they all converge around a normative nostalgic ideal embedded in social and economic structures.

This thesis aims to separate the rural idyll from all other defining discourses of rurality and present a theoretical framework that is responsible and authentic. Here I would like to acknowledge my own bias. Growing up as a White woman in rural north Alabama, I have shaped my own ideas of rurality through my personal lived experience. As a result, I have actively sought to learn from people’s experiences specific to race, class, and geography that were not my own. While challenging my own biases, I believe that my experience as a rural resident uniquely positions me to conduct this research.


Urban Normativity

While perceptions of the rural idyll often hinder the study and practice of rural design and planning, urban normativity and urban bias are equally limiting. Both terms have been explored through various fields of study, including urban studies, geography, and development, as concepts that describe the ways in which urban areas are often privileged over rural areas in terms of resources, opportunities, and representation.

‘Urban normativity’ refers to social and cultural norms that present the urban experience as dominant and prioritize urban lifestyles, creating a sense of inferiority for those living in rural areas. This normativity also creates the perception that urban areas are the centers of modernity, development, and progress, while rural areas are ‘backward’ and in need of urbanization. The dominance of urban normativity has influenced property markets, class consciousness, and the allocation of resources. Additionally, academic discourse has been affected as universities often reflect and reinforce urban normativity, with urban areas often being prioritized in research and cultural representation, which in turn perpetuates bias towards urban issues and perspectives. In contrast, rural challenges and representations are often overlooked or marginalized.

While this thesis acknowledges urban bias, I do not aim to be antirural, as urban perspectives and systems are critical to creating effective change. Yet, the exploration of ‘urban normativity’ seeks to present a theoretical framework that offers an alternative perspective to dominate discourse.

27 Ibid
CASE: Black Belt Region

The Black Belt Region of the Southern United States was selected as the region of focus for this thesis as a specific geography to develop rural theory. The selection was made in part as a response to the region’s rich history, which, while painful and turbulent, has developed a unique rural culture. Originally known for its dark, fertile soil and later its predominantly Black population, the Black Belt Region was created by glacial shift, topsoil accumulation, colonial invasion, violence, forced migration, forced labor, and ongoing inequity. Today the region serves as home to the nation’s largest concentration of Black Rural Communities. Primarily because of its demographic composition, the region is an outlier to the typical urban and rural political binary, with many of its counties voting majority Democrat in both the 2016 and 2020 elections while surrounded by predominantly red states. Containing a large portion of the nation’s forests and agricultural land, the Black Belt plays a critical role in the future of the U.S. as we collectively strive toward racial justice and environmental sustainability.

Defining the Black Belt

Defined and described in various ways within academia, political discourse, community organizations, and popular culture, the Black Belt has served as an important geographic reference and personal identity. In Booker T. Washington’s eminent work, *Up from Slavery*, the Black Belt is defined by its history and the inimitable connection between Black people and land through economic dependence. Linking land to slave labor as a means of resource extraction was facilitated through the creation of a “close society,” which aimed to socially isolate its morally reprehensible practice from the nation while maintaining support of the global economy. W.E.B. Du Bois gives insight into the enclosure of an entire region through his description of the Black Belt as “a strange land of shadows at which even slaves paled in the past, and whence come now only faint and half-intelligible murmurs to the world beyond.” The region is also frequently defined by inequity, as Whiteness and economic gain continually worked to keep Blacks within the region from all forms of power. Stretching across 11 states and 623 counties, its residents experience persistent poverty and ongoing systemic racism.

29 See chapter three.
PROCESS: Framing + Methodology

Terminology

Though this thesis questions the categorization of human settlement into typological groups as well as the dominant associations with the terms ‘rural’ and ‘urban,’ I have been unable to escape their use. However, I have chosen ‘rural’ intentionally over alternatives such as ‘hinterland’ and ‘countryside,’ which is further discussed in chapter one. Collectively we need to develop more precise language to discuss our social and environmental relationships. One example of a conceptual critique that has changed terminology is Val Pulman’s work which argues that the term ‘natural resources’ is human-centric, overlooking the interests and well-being of non-human species and ecosystems, resulting in severe consequences.\(^{33}\) She offers an alternative term, ‘ecosystem services,’ as a recognition that natural systems provide essential services to human beings that deserve our respect and are not dependent on our use, which I will use throughout the thesis.

Drawing from Imani Perry, the author of “South to America,” I capitalize ‘White’ and ‘Black’ throughout this thesis as an acknowledgment of the racial categories that were both created by colonialism and are continuously enforced by our “law, customs, policies, protest, economic relations, and culture.”\(^{34}\) I also use ‘Black’ and ‘African American’ interchangeably throughout the text, as the majority of Black residents of the Black Belt are both “dark-skinned people of African descent” and “born in the United States.”\(^{35}\)

Additionally, following Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, I use ‘Indigenous,’ ‘Indian,’ and ‘Native’ interchangeably when referring to the communities and nations of which the southeastern region of the continent is the land of their fathers.\(^ {36}\) I use both the nations’ names in their own language combined with more familiar usages such as Muskogee (Creek) and Tsalagi (Cherokee).

Soft Ethnography: Interviews and Observations

As many rural narratives are remarkably underrepresented within scholarly work, ethnography serves as a critical component of this thesis. In January of 2023, I traveled across the deep south, driving from the bank of the Mississippi River to the seemingly endless pine forests of Georgia. For 20 days, I stopped at local grocery stores – asking the shift manager for permission to conduct surveys by the entrance. While an intentional map of ideal grocery stores was created based on administrative definitions of rurality, county voting history, and socioeconomic conditions, interview locations were ultimately determined by chain store policy, the timing of my travels, and fluctuating weather conditions. I spent an average of 1.6 hours at each site, documenting each survey and the overall participation rate. Leaning into my southern accent, I introduced myself as a graduate student to each participant and emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions I posed.

While the insights gained through individual perspectives have been highly influential in this work, several limitations to the study shaped whose voices were heard.

My influence as an interviewer: As a young White woman conducting interviews in the Black Belt South, my age, race, and gender affected who participated in the study and the responses given.\(^ {37}\) Historically, due to systemic and violent racism, White women have been positioned within the white supremacist power structure, and their gender privilege has been used as a threat.\(^ {38}\) Regardless of my intentions and attempts to approach participants equitably, ongoing racism makes my role as an interviewer a specific factor and lens to the study.

Participant Equity: Among the demographic composition of the collective participants, young people from the age of 18-30 were underrepresented. While 16% is comparable to the overall demographics of the Black Belt, the majority of my interviews were conducted during daylight hours, corresponding with the typical business day in January, which had the potential to affect representation. Additionally, the study resulted in relative gender equity among participants. Still, many women between the 18-30 and 31-45 age categories were with their children under 5, and I only engaged with them if prompted, as a previously outlined rule of the study.


Location's Socioeconomic Distribution: Due to conditions surrounding survey locations previously mentioned, the socioeconomic clientele marketed to by each grocery store chain was not evenly distributed across the geographies surveyed.

Research Exploitation: Communities within the Black Belt bear the burden of both being understudied and underrepresented, as well as being used as a common statistic that is manipulated based on the individual agendas of many politicians, policymakers, and researchers. Specific locations within the Black Belt, such as Hale County, have captured the imagination of the academic community. Dr. Robert Bullard uses the term “research fatigue” to describe the phenomenon experienced by many communities of color as they are continuously approached for their involvement in surveys or focus groups while seeing little results from their involvement. He argues that the lack of resulting actionable items creates a sense of distrust and skepticism. Since the goals of this thesis were mainly to build theory through knowledge building, these interviews had the potential to contribute to research fatigue. To address this, in conversation with participants, I never indicated any intention towards action. Still, I made it clear that I was attempting to understand how each individual relates to ‘rural’ or ‘non-rural’ space. While conducting most of the interviews, participants were generally happy to be asked about their life and home. I was frequently met with responses such as, “How did you end up out here?” and “Why are you interested in this place?” Jackson, MS participants were the most familiar with participating in research studies. As a result, I was particularly sensitive to my initial approach to potential participants.

Throughout the trip, 178 residents were interviewed from 11 different sites in 3 states.

In addition to the interviews conducted with members of the public at grocery stores, throughout the trip, I engaged a variety of local actors to discuss methods of practice throughout the region, including 4 planners, 3 designers, 4 local officials, and 4 community organization leaders. As planning and design is already a ‘small world,’ especially in the Black Belt, where this research reveals limited capacity, I do not identify specific actors. I am vague about their geographies, as identifying the participants would not be difficult. This decision was made to emphasize that the critiques made are about the discipline and its organizational structure as a whole, not on the actions of a single organization.

Geospatial Analysis
This study employs geospatial analysis to investigate social data, flows, methods of production, and relationships between spatial typologies. The study’s data was collected from various sources and is listed alongside its associated graphic.

Literature and Planning Document Analytical Review
The research relies on a range of cross-disciplinary scholarly work to analyze conceptualizations of the relationship between rural and urban spaces and systems. In Chapter One, predominantly peer-reviewed articles and published works are reviewed through inductive classification and reflexive interpretation of theoretical frameworks. The second chapter draws from similar sources, with the addition of published planning and design documents. The final chapter utilizes mixed media, including news clippings, videos, and self-published works, to collate multiple perspectives not typically presented in tandem.

Structure of What Follows
The thesis aims to create a place-based study of the Black Belt Region, which is in conversation with existing works of rural theory and produces knowledge contributing to the discipline’s broader understanding of rurality. This is accomplished in three ways. First, by analyzing existing theory in relation to the realities of the Black Belt. Then, by exploring how design and planning are practiced in the region. Finally, by evaluating the additional mechanisms that influence rurality, including goods, people, and governance.
CHAPTER 1
Theorizing Design and Planning in Relation to Rurality
Introduction

While urban theory typically focuses solely on urban space, rural theory is frequently developed in relation to the urban. This chapter divides theoretical works which compare and contrast urban and rural settlement typologies into five basic categories: Binary, exchange, transect, gradient, and network. Each category corresponds to specific design and planning approaches which are explored within the context of the Black Belt Region of the Southern United States.

Binary

Theories in the Binary category image the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’ as two separate systems which operate independently. Explorations of the ‘rural-urban divide’ are also included in the Binary as they perceive the lived realities of urban and rural residents as separate.

A Disciplinary Divide

The initial distinction between the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’ has been the subject of much cross-disciplinary, scholarly debate. Within the field of design and planning, Lewis Mumford writes, "human life swings between two poles: movement and settlement," and that the origins of the city can be traced back to the emergence of settled agriculture. He emphasizes the development of urban fortifications as "a clean break between the city and the countryside." In “The Country and the City,” Raymond Williams argues that the historic origins of a distinction occurred much later, in the sixteenth century, when the emergence of capitalism led to a new kind of urbanization that separated people from the land and created a new sense of alienation from nature. Both narratives validate rural and urban segmentation by centering urbanity as progress and framing rurality as a space of extraction.

Regardless of the moment in which a ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ divergence did or did not occur, their categorization was realized through the division of academic discourse in multiple fields.

In the 1930s, Chicago was the largest inland city with a population of over three million inhabitants, enabling it to become a laboratory for the study of human behavior and the escalating urban phenomena. Breaking new ground, The Chicago School of Sociology began merging statistics and geography, mapping behavior according to zones. Building off Simmel’s work which centered on the individual rather than the physical environment and argued for differences between urban and rural experiences, Burgess’s now famous diagram, “The Growth of the City,” imagines a concentric city organized by individual’s occupation of space. The diagram introduced the idea that moving out from the nucleus meant a lessening of the urban condition and isolated urban society from its context, “freeing the city from associations with rural life.” The separation of the rural and the urban was continued in Louis Wirth’s work, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” arguing that urban development is critical to

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2 Williams, Raymond. 1973. The Country and the City. New York: Oxford University Press. Williams argues that the rural has been historically developed as a site of extraction but critiques this framing, calling for a rethinking of the countryside which recognizes the cultural and social value of rural life and communities. Additionally, while explaining this divergence, Williams argues that rural and urban are inextricably linked. His work is discussed further in the next section, “Exchange.”

modernization and states that the rapid industrialization that occurred over the last century (1856–1956) "invites the sociologist to study the differences between the rural and the urban mode of living."  

The emerging urban-centric focus in sociology was countered by a selection of newly proclaimed "Rural Sociologists" who voted to break away from the American Sociological Society in 1937 formally.  

A prominent member, Pitirim Aleksandrovich Sorokin, published a three-volume work, "A Systematic Source Book in Rural Sociology," in which he counters Park's distinctive characteristics of the urban with opposing rural characteristics, cementing the argument of a "fundamental dichotomy" between the urban and rural world. Liberty Hyde Bailey, another prominent Rural Sociologist, led the Country Life Movement in the United States, which aimed at the technological development of rural areas and improvement of the daily life of rural residents. In his reflection on the movement, Bailey explained his perception of the binary, going as far as separating the "town mind" and the "city mind" as well as the "real urbanite" and the "real ruralite." However, he separates forms of individual identity. Bailey states, "The fundamental weakness in our civilization is the fact that the city and the country represent antagonistic forces."

The division of rural and urban study within the field of sociology occurred as the dominant concerns between each group were put into competition with one another. While there has been a growing interest in the interconnected nature of rural and urban settlements, division is still prevalent. Rural Sociology has grown continuously as comparatively secluded, frequently co-hosted within university departments such as the Department of Agriculture, Economics, Sociology, and Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Additionally, many universities in the U.S. host a "Department of Sociology," not claiming to differentiate. Yet, their research predominately focuses on urban contexts, giving the semblance of interconnectivity while neglecting rurality. As Rural Sociology seeks to engage an increasingly urban audience and "Sociology" continues largely ignoring cities' dependence on rural areas and the dynamics that arise from this relationship, the institutional division of city and country persists.

In the 1960s, the field of Geography faced a similar period of rural and urban division. Attempting to apply a new form of scientific rigor within the field, a new "spatial science" began to focus on urban areas. The resulting work focused on 'urban geography,' mapping systems which effectively marginalized rural areas as an extension of the urban. Unlike the field of Sociology, there was no equivalent investigation of the rural at that time, but rather the development of a 'systematic agricultural geography' which subsequently "reinforced the association of the rural and farming." It was not until the 1970s that "rural geography" was conceptualized. Disseminated broadly through textbooks, the "rural" was recognized beyond its role within agricultural production, but their attempts to create a spatial "container" for rural space, mapping clear boundaries between the rural and the urban, proved to be a methodological problem and constrained their overall perception of rural systems. Since the late 1970s, the field of geography shifted its approach from the 'principals of positivism,' which focused on objectively defining human settlement with functional characteristics, to a political economy approach. The acknowledgment of farming and rural economic development within the state's capitalistic system led to the reintegration of rural and urban study.

 Though the formal disciplinary divisions of 'rural' and 'urban' occurred on two different time scales within Geography and Sociology, incalculable damage was done. Many foundational works within each discipline were developed during this period and are referenced with no acknowledgment of the shift in conceptualization. Additionally, the competition for resources and hierarchical framing which caused the initial division were never institutionally addressed. At the same time, there was never a formal divide between 'rural' and 'urban' study in the design or planning disciplines, mainly to the dominance of urban study; the formal division within geography and sociology affected theory in the respective domains due to the interconnected nature of the fields.

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4 Wirth, Louis. 1956. Urbanism as a Way of Life. Wirth argues that rural life in the United States has been the main focus of government business referencing the report. County Life Commission, in 1909 and calling for an acceleration of urban study to the same caliber.


6 President Theodore Roosevelt supported the Country Life movement as he saw rural values as "what is fundamentally best and most needed in our American Life." Roosevelt's perspective and creation of national policy serves as an example of political shaping of the American Rural further discussed in Chapter 3.


15 It is also important to note that the division of study into categories occurred when there was an extreme lack of diversity in the field. The relationship between categorical thinking and white, male leadership is explored further in Section 3, Transact.

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An Experiential Divide

While the academic disciplines of Sociology and Geography have predominantly merged, and theoretical categories in the coming sections are highly critical of the dichotomization of urban and rural, research pertaining to categorical differences are not purely constrained to the past. Analyzing peer-reviewed articles which address the “rural-urban divide” from the last 20 years across disciplines, topics, and geographies reveals that the binary remains prevalent in academic study.

Among the articles analyzed, the ‘divide’ broadly references unequal access to services, political differences, and socioeconomic inequalities. The political divide between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ space has become increasingly apparent in recent years. Scholars across various disciplines have sought to understand the emergence of the divide by exploring economic, social, and political factors that have contributed. Several argue that the system is flawed, arguing that consolidation of labor and the resulting density distribution has resulted in unequal representation within the electoral college. While acknowledging the shift in density, others argue that rural vote has been undervalued as national campaigns focus on the concerns of urban and suburban voters, neglecting the unique challenges facing rural communities.

In “Dirt Road Revival,” Chole Maxmin and Canyon Woodward write what they call a ‘Love Letter to the Democratic Party’ with a heavy critique of the party’s abandonment of Rural America and a call for the disruption of “politics as usual.” Through their experience winning two successful campaigns in the “most rural county in the most rural state in the nation,” they advocate for building relationships at a grassroots level focusing on collective goals and avoiding divisive language. Others argue that the economic conditions of rural America are a critical component of the political divide. Loka Ashwood’s book “For Profit Democracy” examines for-profit corporations’ increasing role and impact on rural communities. She argues that the interests of these corporations often conflict with the interests of rural areas, particularly in areas such as agriculture, natural resources, and land use. Ashwood contends that the government’s close relationship with these corporations has led to policies that favor corporate profits over the well-being of rural communities.

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16 The systematic review of ‘Urban-Rural Divide’ literature employs a meta-analytic case study approach. To conduct a comprehensive overview – defined by peer-reviewed articles containing the phrase “Urban-Rural Divide” in the title or abstract – 2,861 articles were identified to establish an initial database.


20 Several authors have discussed how political terminology has become divisive across rural and urban space including Gelman, Andrew. 2008. Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Why Americans Vote the Way They Do. Princeton University Press.

Beyond the impact of political and economic systems, there is a division in understanding and perception between rural and urban communities. Some argue that urban populations frequently question why rural populations vote “against their own interest” due to their misunderstanding of political leanings based on qualitative approaches. In “We’re Still Here,” Jennifer Silva argues that quantitative understandings of political leanings, which rely on demographics and other statistical data, can obscure the complexity and nuance of political attitudes. She suggests that qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews and ethnographic research, can provide a more nuanced understanding of working-class Americans’ political beliefs and experiences. She also argues that the long history of economic prioritization given to urban centers has been detrimental to rural communities. As a result, they have given up on national economic policy’s impact on their lives.

Black Belt Binaries

In the Black Belt Region, a divide between the rural and the urban is frequently a result of a lack of access to services or financial limitations. Ms. Dorthey23 lives in Selma, Alabama, and drives to Montgomery once a month to visit her daughter. While she chooses to live in a rural area, she is frustrated with the lack of access to services that dictate many aspects of her life. “The future is geared towards cities. The technology doesn’t even reach out here. We have bad cell service, unreliable utilities, and public transportation is just a dream. There aren’t even enough school buses to pick up all the children.” The stark contrast between her life and her daughter’s becomes evident on their monthly visits. “Montgomery is just a completely different place. I don’t like the way it feels there. I just don’t feel like I belong, you know? Sure, I can get my shopping done, but I don’t want to live there.” When asked why she chooses to live in a rural area, Ms. Dorthey mentions, “I love living in the middle of all of these farms.” Though not involved with agriculture, she states, “It’s important to live out here. I feel connected to this place.” When asked about the future of rural areas and the potential to improve access to the services she mentioned, she explained, “Those things just aren’t up to us. We don’t have any control over that.” Ms. Dorthey’s feeling of belonging in her rural home but alienation in Montgomery contribute to her perception of the rural and urban as divided. Additionally, her view that the future does not prioritize rural areas and her lack of personal control perpetuates a structural binary.

In Milledgeville, Georgia, Ms. Temeka24 also feels some services are lacking. “The schools really aren’t great here. The private school is expensive, and the public school doesn’t get enough resources.”25 But she feels her access to some services is better since she lives in a rural area. “The first responders here are great. They are always here in no time and are willing to go the extra mile to help you out. I guess it’s because everybody knows everybody here. You know it’s rural, so they don’t get too many calls, and if they have time, they’ll do what they can.” Previously living in an urban area, Ms. Temeka moved to her rural home mainly for financial reasons. “I sold my house in the city. It was just too expensive. The cities are growing, and houses are getting too close together. It’s more affordable out here. The house was cheaper; the taxes are lower. I grow a lot of food in my garden, and that helps some.” Since her life in the city and the country presented her with alternate financial realities, Ms. Temeka still sees them as separate entities and rarely travels between them spatially. “I probably only go to Atlanta every two to three months. I have a few (medical) specialists I go to. But I don’t need to go other than that.” While Ms. Temeka found financial relief by moving to a rural area, the binary is flipped for Mr. Shavers,26 who lives in Jackson, Mississippi. When asked about the future of rural areas, he stated, “I don’t know. It might be a better place to live, but only people with money live in the country. The millionaires out there own a lot of land, and that will get you somewhere.” Of all participants interviewed, 44% used language such as “in here” or “out there” when describing rural geographies. Their relational understanding of the “rural” as outside the “urban” perpetuates the binary and casts populations within the opposing category as “other.”27

Compared to other disciplines, design, and planning are less focused on the divide. While theatrical concepts explored in the following sections rightly examine ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ in a variety of interconnected frameworks, this lack of acknowledgment of differences in spatial conditions and lived experiences leaves the discipline behind in asking critical questions, completely removing the ‘Binary’ as a form of structural analysis fails to challenge why binary models persist outside of academia.

22 While Silva predominantly writes about working class American’s in ‘small towns’ she concludes that her research is also applicable to the rural working class.

23 ‘Ms. Dorthey’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. She is a black, female between the age of 46-65 and identifies as living in a rural area.

24 ‘Ms. Temeka’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. She is a black, female between the age of 31-45 and identifies as living in a rural area.

25 ‘Segregation Academies’ are prevalent across the Southern United States and their influence is explored further in Chapter 3. No research was conducted on the racial demographics of schools in this location specifically.

26 ‘Mr. Shavers’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. He is a black male between the age of 18-30 and identifies as living in a non-rural area.

27 Eric Harms explored the “otherness” that emerged along the rural-urban divide of Ho Chi Minh City. He defines “otherness” as a dynamic process which is informed by spatial realities that influence how people perceive and relate to each other. Harms, Eric. 2013. Saigon’s Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Exchange

Theories that have been placed under the category of exchange conceptualize the ‘urban’ and the ‘rural’ as two predominantly divided systems but acknowledge that they are interdependent and engage in various exchanges that are critical to the survival of each.

Hierarchy + Inequity

Henri Lefebvre’s 1974 work, “The Production of Space,” conceptualizes urban and rural relationships as symbiotic but hierarchical throughout history.28 He emphasizes the distinct roles of each category, casting the rural as the ‘product’ of which agricultural produce, labor, and ‘rural society’ are extracted in service of the urban while the town’s only reciprocal responsibility is in an administrative and military capacity in which the ‘countryside’ is to be controlled and protected. His arguments that the urban is extracting “surplus product” from the rural and that the urban must “transform the countryside in service of the town” contradict.29 He does not tie this contradiction to the conflict, which he states is inevitable. “Harmony between the nucleus and its surroundings only occurs if the circumstances are right… In nearly all cases, however, the political and religious center is marked by the conflict between town and country, between urban and agrarian space.”

While he sees no solution to this conflict, he emphasizes the spatial and relational separation of rural and urban as mandatory. He argues that when the town has become separate as a “unified entity,” only then can it transcend the “ancient struggle” between people and nature. He describes the merging of town and country as a “bastard form” that “degrades both urban and rural space” as they “thrust both into a confusion which would be utterly without form was it not the structure” imposed by the space of the state.” When discussing 1960s Paris, Lefebvre laments the contradictions of the urban as both the “setting of struggle” and the “stakes of that struggle.” He states that the city is the sole source of power and does not understand why solutions should be sought in the rural questioning, “How could one aim for power without reaching for the places where power resides?”

As a result, Lefebvre could not have foreseen the French farmer’s movement, Confédération Paysanne (CP), of the late 1980s and 1990s, in which rural ‘peasants’ gained political power through resistance to neoliberal globalization.30 Though consistently referring to the discontent of the ‘peasant’ throughout

29 Lefebvre largely draws these conclusions based on his analysis of medieval European cities without a breadth of geographic study.
several historical analyses of urban and rural relationships, he never attributes mechanisms that return value to the rural post-extraction as the responsibility of the city or the state to improve rural livelihoods. Instead, he reinforces the need for the urban to suppress the rural, stating, “the towns have always found it hard to contain them[projects] – they are, in fact, ever potential conquers of the town.”

While Lefebvre acknowledges the interconnected exchange between the rural and the urban as determinates of growth and limited materiality, emphasizing the conflict between the ‘domination’ and ‘appropriation’ of nature, he does not attribute the same importance to social constructs and experiences of space limiting his theoretical framing. As a result, his limited conceptualization of rural and urban exchange stunts his overall conceptions of the production of space.

**Linkages + Flows**

Cecilia Tacoli’s work goes beyond Lefebvre’s by arguing that ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ interdependence is more than material and economic but includes social and cultural connections. Across several of her published works, Tacoli theorizes urban and rural linkages comparing research across multiple geographies, including Senegal, Tanzania, Jakarta, Mexico, China, and several others. Within her conceptualization, she acknowledges the existence of an experiential divide between the rural and the urban. Still, she argues that both individual households and larger social and economic systems mitigate the divide through processes of exchange. She categorizes flows between spatial categories as people, goods, and waste. Exploring flows of people, Tacoli critiques “push and pull” models that focus on rural-to-urban migration as an incomplete analysis and explores forms of daily migration where rural residents commute to urban space to sell their products or work in non-land-based sectors. Economic conditions have also led to the creation of “multi-spatial households,” where one family member migrates to an urban area but retains social and economic links to their rural home. This partial migration process can also be linked to “circular migration patterns,” which involve the temporary or seasonal movement of people between rural and urban areas due to rising city living costs. Additionally, she explores rural-to-urban migration as an incomplete analysis and explores forms of daily migration where rural residents commute to urban space to sell their products or work in non-land-based sectors. Economic conditions have also led to the creation of “multi-spatial households,” where one family member migrates to an urban area but retains social and economic links to their rural home. This partial migration process can also be linked to “circular migration patterns,” which involve the temporary or seasonal movement of people between rural and urban areas due to rising city living costs.

She describes the exchanges of goods between rural and urban areas as essential, leading her to imagine their spatial typologies as more equal, contrary to Lefebvre’s hierarchical model. She argues that the global focus on market-led development has contributed to the dominant acceptance of the “virtuous circle” model, which assumes that higher rural incomes from agricultural production led to non-farm jobs, urban activity, and diversified markets, which increases demand for rural produce and boosts productivity, improving both rural and urban livelihoods. However, Tacoli emphasizes that the model may not work in every situation due to limited access to inputs and services, inequitable land ownership patterns, and market exclusion. Additionally, the model assumes markets are perfect, whereas more complex access and control mechanisms affect market outcomes. Lastly, the model assumes that rising income from agriculture drives non-farm activities, but the direction of the rural-urban linkage is often irrelevant.

Tacoli further explores the production and exchange of goods through the concept of “sectorial interactions,” in which programmatic activities begin to transcend their typical spatial categorization. She explores the practice of urban agriculture, which has been conducted across classes, as an efficient way of recycling urban waste and contributing to resource conservation. However, it may also negatively impact the environment due to the use of fertilizers and pesticides by untrained farmers. In addition, she discusses the continued emergence of non-agricultural rural employment, which includes non-farm and off-farm activities, as part of a long-term process of “deagrarization.” She argues that the process has contributed to a decrease in internal rural-to-urban migration but has also
resulted in environmental degradation, excessive extraction from the natural resource base, and a loss of assets for small farmers, forcing them to turn to non-agricultural activities as a lifeline. Her analysis of sectorial interactions has led her to question the distinctions between the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban,’ as they have become complex and new spatial typologies have emerged. Her most recent work also considers the role of peri-urban and small urban centers and their role in systems of exchange which is explored in the Network section of this thesis.

**Black Belt Exchange**

While Lefebvre’s conceptualization of the rural as a means of production and a source of labor holds in the Black Belt, as the entire region was intentionally crafted into a productive landscape and its residents have consistently been subjugated into specific labor systems, the rural Black Belt is more dynamic, exchanging more than products and receiving less than protection. Additionally, his attribution of regulatory and organizational power to urban systems does not apply to the Black Belt, as political power has often been held in rural space, first in large landowners and today in its democratic majority.

Tacoli’s model of exchange is more applicable as sectorial interactions are common, and flows of people, goods, and waste occur between spatial typologies. Yet the model is still limited when applied in the Black Belt, predominately when analyzing the equity and rate of flows. While Tacoli explores different forms in which the ‘flow of people’ manifests, the conditions within the Black Belt have the potential to enrich the overall conceptual framing.

Migration in and through the Black Belt has occurred on several timescales and has been voluntary, forced, a means of escape, and in search of a desired lifestyle. When interviewing individuals in the Black Belt, 92% of those who identified as living in a rural area said they chose to live there. Additionally, 30% of those who choose to live in a rural area work in an urban area. These residents utilize methods of exchange to meet their needs.

When asked why residents choose to live in a rural area, 65% answered by describing something that was ‘there’ rather than something that was ‘not there,’ demonstrating that for them, rurality was not an escape from an undesired condition but in search of a specific social or natural system. Mr. Jason Sanders explained how he navigates rural and urban exchange to further his career while maintaining social connections. He stated, “I’m an engineer, so I travel into the city for work every day, but we decided to live here. I’m from here, and everyone I know is here. I wanna stay a part of this community.”

Mr. Jason Sanders is a pseudonym for an interview participant. He is a black male between the age of 31-45 and identifies as living in a rural area.

In conclusion, while Lefebvre and Tacoli’s models help understand certain aspects of exchange in the Black Belt, they don’t fully capture the region’s unique dynamics. The Black Belt’s history, political power structures, and the motivations of its residents contribute to a more complex exchange system. Further exploration of these dynamics is necessary to fully comprehend the interplay between rural and urban in the Black Belt and its impact on the lives of its inhabitants.

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35 See chapter three
36 Ibid
37 Mr. Jason Sanders is a pseudonym for an interview participant. He is a black male between the age of 31-45 and identifies as living in a rural area.
38 Mr. Don Jefferies is a pseudonym for an interview participant. He is a black male between the age of 46-65 and identifies as living in a rural area.
Transect

Several theories conceptualize the relationship between the ‘urban’ and the ‘rural’ as a ‘transect,’ as two extreme conditions with various categories in between. Multiple works have defined a collection of categories and the defining role of each.

Multi-Disciplinary Development

The ‘transect’ as a conceptual framework has evolved significantly across multiple disciplines over time, originating in geographic studies as a scientific method for studying habitats. Alexander von Humboldt developed this first formulation in 1793, which analyzed the natural aspects of habitat from ocean to ocean, including elements above and below the water’s surface and atmospheric elements. Later, Joseph Meyer illustrated the concept around 1860, focusing on the anthropological perspective of the transect as an ‘intellectual concept.’

In urban planning, Patrick Geddes’ ‘Valley Section’ from his book ‘Cities in Evolution’ was the first conceptualization of the transect that included human activity corresponding with the declension of natural habitats. Geddes articulated a series of human (economic) societies ranging from hunters in the highlands to farmers in the foothills to tradespeople along the shores. His concept saw humans as part of the habitat, framing the transect regarding human exploitation of nature. Geddes saw the transect as an ordering system that ‘nature is sacred, and the city is profane’ or, more importantly, that they be defended in a court of law. However, the concept perpetuated the narrative that ‘nature is sacred, and the city is profane’ or, more importantly, that they are elements that should be separated. This led to four decades of community designs that were environmentally well-intentioned and aesthetically green but otherwise identical to sprawl in their socioeconomic and carbon effects.

From Concept to Design Tool

New Urbanists embraced the transect as a foundational concept and developed Smart Codes, or form-based codes, to shape the built environment. Smart Codes introduced a transect-based zoning system, dividing land into categories that reflected varying intensity and development character. Each zone had its own set of regulations tailored to its desired character and function, from preserving agricultural land in rural zones to encouraging mixed-use development and higher densities in urban zones. The intention was to balance preserving the unique identity of different areas and promoting integration. While the transect-based approach of Smart Codes offered a more nuanced understanding of the built environment, critics argue that it may need to be more balanced with the complexity and diversity of real-world spaces. Ultimately, the transect and Smart Codes further segment rural and urban areas and do not acknowledge their interconnectedness or how the programmatic elements are blurred.

Designers and Planners in the Black Belt were particularly critical of New Urbanism and Smart Codes, concluding that they did not accurately apply to any form of spatial condition in the region. A local public planner, Mr. Jeffery Gordon, shared his experience working with the new urbanists stating, “Dunay came in to do a workshop, the whole team. They drew incredible illustrations and pictures, but we’re sitting there like, you know, we aren’t going to be able to do that.” He went on to explain how they had differing perceptions of urbanism, creating tension between local designers and the hired consultants. “They were insistent that we have a town center, a town square. They even suggested we had too many churches downtown. They insisted that there should just be one per unit. I said, okay, which congregation are you gonna tell to leave?” Mr. Gordon shared further how their downtown does not work as one categorical unit and needed a planning policy that addressed smaller scales of intervention. “They just swept across the whole town treating everything the same. (A community member) pointed out that they had placed a square right along the 60-foot drop between the main street and the riverfront. Those are basically separate districts in and of themselves due to the mixed-use at the top of the bluff and the industry by the water.”

Mr. James Newbury, a designer in a separate location in the region, similarly expressed that the city he was working in did not fit within the categorical limits of New Urbanism and Smart Codes further segment rural and urban areas and do not acknowledge their interconnectedness or how the programmatic elements are blurred.
implied based due to a variety of financial implications stating, “A group from South Carolina came down here, they were coming out of the New Urbanist stuff, and they were what I call utopian planners. They showed us a whole host of sketches of two-story red brick townhouses going down state street. The plan had nothing to do with property lines, no economic reality, no market, and no business plan. I just kept asking who was going to buy all of those bricks.” Mr. James explained that the plan was short-lived, and they ended up creating a corridor business development project instead, which was beneficial but lacked the original spatial goals of the project. A public administrator, Ms. Ronda Simmons, in yet another location, discussed the process of attempting to implement the Smart Code as a zoning system, “They [New Urbanist Consultant team] came down and did a “zoning light” project that no one liked. They made up 13 new neighborhoods and talked about how the density would flow from the urban center to the rural areas of the county. I tried to explain how (our community) doesn’t work like that.” She explained how mixed land and programmatic uses made categorization challenging, “…I mean, the town hall is only two blocks over from one of the largest farms in the county, and they wanted to label it urban. It wasn’t feasible.” Ms. Simmons concluded, stating her frustration, “Didn’t listen to the zoning board, didn’t listen to staff, didn’t listen to anybody …but we had a comprehensive plan that we had paid a lot of money for. None of it worked, and the community didn’t trust us anymore, but wow, those drawings were nice.”

Ultimately, implementation of the transect as a design tool and planning mechanism has failed in the Black Belt as categorization does not represent existing spatial functions. Additionally, the transect and Smart Code only represent rurality as one category with a common planning and design strategy. This presentation of the rural as a single homogenous space detracts from rural residents’ diverse spatial and lived conditions. Additionally, as many of the original developers of New Urbanism and the Smart Code were relatively unfamiliar with the rural, they continuously projected urban-centric views onto their definition of rural space, which can be seen in their initial explanation of the transect where Senen Antonio depicts the “fashion of the transect” showing Paris Hilton in a denim shirt holding a pitchfork to represent the rural or in their depiction of the agricultural transect that includes various forms of industrial agriculture within the rural but ascribes residential and community gardens only to urban space.

**Categorization as Simplification**

Planning and Design utilize categorical thinking to distill down the essence of spaces and systems as a methodology of understanding and intervention in hopes of improvement and is embedded in several of the relational theory categories, including the transect. Categorical thinking has also become embedded into the ‘social imaginary’ and our vernacular terminology, including within the Black Belt. In Macon, Georgia, Mr. James Dupree described his living choices using categorical terms stating, “I live in a suburban area. It’s quiet and peaceful; the cops drive around here at night, so I feel safer here than I did when I lived in the city.” Similarly, Ms. Sherry Wilkerson described distinctly different categories relating to spaces she spends time in Alabama, “We are in the city. There’s too many stores around for it to be anything else. I live in the total county. There’s no houses around. It’s just me and the trees.” In Yazoo City, Mississippi, Mr. Randy Jefferson begins discussing categories based on their legal designation, “Well, see, this is town because we are in the city limits. Everything outside of this is rural.” But when asked about where he chooses to live and why, the categories were challenged, “I live on a farm, but I like having my neighbors close… Sometimes I walk over to the store. So, I guess it’s kind of similar to town in some ways.”

Categorical boundaries continue to deteriorate in the Black Belt when speaking to Mr. George Hanson in Selma, Alabama, who described the area around a grocery store within the municipal boundaries as “right in-between.” Mr. Hanson said that the categories were blurred due to the concentration of houses. When asked if he thought it was a suburban space, he replied, “No, it’s not suburban. See all of those gardens in people’s yards? That’s more rural. The houses are close together, but they don’t act like suburban people.” In Flora, Mississippi, 8 out of the 9 main federal definitions consider the town to be urban, yet 81% of the residents interviewed considered Flora to be rural. When asked why they considered Flora to be rural, several residents mentioned social connections, “There’s not a lot of people, and we all know each other.” Others mentioned methods of production, “There’s farms every way you look.” One resident disagreed, stating, “Yeah, it looks rural, but we are right on the highway, and I could be in the capital of the state in 30 minutes.” While individuals use categorical terms to describe and understand their environment, they are frequently contested. Also, there are disconnects between categorization between discourses. In 4 of the 11 sites in which surveys were conducted, there was a discrepancy between administrative definitions of the rural and the community’s definition of the rural.  

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50. ‘Mr. Dupree’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. He is a black male between the age of 31-45 and identifies as living in a nonrural area.

51. ‘Ms. Wilkerson’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. She is a black female between the age of 36-65 and identifies as living in a rural area.

52. ‘Mr. George Hanson’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. He is a white male over the age of 65 and identifies as living in a rural area.
The segmentation of human settlement patterns into typological categories is supported by several actors that shape the built environment beyond designers and planners, including the state and society. In “Seeing Like a State,” James Scott argues that the state has historically played a central role in the creation of categories as a means of imposing a high degree of order and legibility onto its territory to make it easier to tax, administer, and control its population.  

This process of “standardization” involves imposing uniform standards and classifications onto a diverse range of existing spatial conditions. The state’s categorization of settlements into “rural,” “urban,” “suburban,” etc., is often based on a narrow set of criteria, such as population density, land use patterns, and economic activity. Scott argues that this oversimplification of complex social and ecological relationships can lead to the destruction of existing local knowledge and practices. Imposing uniform standards can fragment and homogenize the diverse ways people use and interact with the environment.

While Scott’s argument focuses on the state as the primary driver of categorization, Mary Douglass looks at the categorization created by society as a whole. Arguing that social order is imposed and developed, Douglass explores how societies classify and organize the world around them through the concept of purity. She explains that individuals and groups actively create and maintain social boundaries through their daily practices and interactions. She argues that segmentation is driven by human’s “natural tendency” to organize and understand the complexity of their environment. The division of categories often results in spatial hierarchies that create and maintain boundaries of which individuals and groups within a society may have a different understanding. Douglass argues that while categories can be useful for organizing and understanding the world, they can also stigmatize or marginalize certain individuals or groups.

While categories can help organize and understand space, they can also be used to stigmatize or marginalize certain individuals or groups. Also, as interview participants emphasized, categories are frequently disputed and only sometimes accurately depict existing spatial conditions. Therefore, designers and planners must be aware of the potential simplification and emergent hierarchies when deploying theory that categorizes spatial typologies.


In 4 of the 11 sites in which surveys were conducted, there was a discrepancy between administrative definitions of the rural and the community's definition of the rural.
Gradient

Theoretical works within the gradient category focus on planar scales of analysis and argue against the categorization of spatial typologies. Each work conceives of the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’ as one system, each having a range of effects on the other.

Planetary Scale: Bound or Blurred?

Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid have developed their self-declared “problematic of urbanization,” or, more commonly known, theory of planetary urbanization, for approximately a decade. They argue that conceptualizations of the city as a bounded spatial unit are limiting and call for a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of spatiality that no longer relies on the categorization of settlement typologies such as urban, suburban, rural, or wilderness. While many of their claims have been highly critiqued, the formulation of “urban theory without an outside” has attracted substantial scholarly debate. Their attempt to negate “inside/outside” dualism fell short mainly to their lack of rigor in understanding rurality. In 2017, Schmid argued that as nonurban spaces are operationalized to support urbanization, they have become integral parts of a “worldwide urban fabric.” While their study of urbanism’s impact outside of its legislative boundaries and acknowledgment of current discourse as city-centric is commendable, their consistent framing of rurality in service of urbanization does little to remove categorical boundaries.

Before Brenner and Schmid began their planetary urbanism explorations, Michael Woods discussed rural transformation due to planetary scale influences developing the model of the ‘global countryside.’ Woods builds from Steger, who defines globalization as “a multidimensional set of social processes that create multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social and economic interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering people in a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant.” Wood’s model serves as a framework for developing a locality-based analysis of globalization in rural areas and highlights the multiple ways rural places are restructured through globalization. He argues that the rural is always in a state of becoming and that the utilization of the model causes questions about the difference in manifestations of globalization in specific places to emerge.

While Brenner and Schmid argue for spatial and categorical unboundedness, their conceptualization of the world’s “oceans, deserts, jungles, mountain ranges, atmosphere” and particularly landscapes of extraction as a “worldwide urban fabric” contradicts their terminological critique, implicating the inclusion into a preexisting system. Alternatively, Woods refers to sites of extraction as “marks of globalization,” inscribed on the rural, creating an abstraction that is neither rural nor urban.

Terminology Critique

The terms ‘hinterland’ and ‘countryside’ have been used to frame the relationship between the rural and urban as inequitable. However, these terminologies are problematic and need to be criticized. ‘Hinterland’ was first used in English during colonial occupations of the west coast of Africa and, in theory, could be identified as the area of influence of a human settlement. It is often accused of identifying the financially contributing area of a specific city and harsh exploitation of the resources of the surrounding ‘noncity.’ Similarly, the term ‘countryside’ has a problematic history. The word ‘country’ originally meant ‘the land spread out around one’ but became used to refer to an area of land and subsequently both to the land set against the town and to the land belonging to a particular people or nation. The term ‘countryside’ initially emphasized the definition of the country relative to the town (the ‘side’ of town) but expanded to take on a broader and symbolically laden meaning in popular culture. Despite this, common and vague definitions of the ‘hinterland’ and ‘countryside’ persist, and the two concepts are often mixed up.

Many of urban planning and design’s most forefronted thinkers whose work is redefining rurality use both ‘hinterland’ and ‘countryside’ frequently, including Brenner and Schmid, who, while critiquing categorization, still consistently refer to the rural as a ‘hinterland,’ or in service to the despite public calls to stop using the term. Additionally, Rem Koolhaas has recently utilized his Martian strategy to analyze the rural as a space that is “completely foreign and amazed,” deems his newly found interest the ‘countryside.’ Yet his terminology and his over-
areas as subordinate to urban areas. It suggests that rural areas exist solely to provide resources for urban areas and that their relationship is inherently exploitative. Furthermore, these terminologies ignore the diversity of rural areas and the ways in which they contribute to society beyond providing resources for urban areas. New terminology that reflects the complexity of the relationship between the rural and urban and recognizes rural areas’ contributions to society needs to be developed. Brenner and Koolhaas’s continued use of ‘hinterland’ and ‘countryside’ has harmed how the design and planning disciplines approach this entire body of relational theory work.

**Black Belt as Global Rural**

The Black Belt serves as an agent of ‘planetary urbanization’ both through its historic evolution, producing cotton, which was spun into cloth through wage labor on which the industrial revolution was built, and through its current exports of oil, agricultural products, and timber at a global scale. 63 While the exploitation of the rural was a part of this system, rural communities also have taken agency over their own condition in ways that affected global development. A few examples of which exist within the development of the cotton industry itself and were presented in Sven Beckert’s work, “Empire of Cotton.” 64

In India, rural farmers and merchants resisted colonial domination by maintaining control over the cotton trade and production. They retained their economic power and influence by forming alliances, establishing networks, and adapting to changing market conditions. The merchants’ resilience forced the colonial authorities to negotiate and compromise, limiting their control and dominance in the cotton industry. Their efforts had a local effect, helping preserve indigenous textile industries and preventing the complete destruction of traditional handicrafts and weaving practices. The continued presence of rural growers and merchants allowed for the survival and growth of local economies, which maintained some degree of autonomy in the face of colonial exploitation. Their actions also had global effects, disrupting the flow of cotton from the Indian subcontinent to Europe, creating periods of scarcity and price fluctuations. This, in turn, affected the global cotton trade and prompted colonial powers to seek alternative sources and supply chains.

In the Black Belt, the emergence of resistance and labor struggles within cotton-growing communities had global impacts. Enslaved people throughout the region resisted their subjugation through various means, such as sabotage, escape, and organized revolts. Their resistance challenged the prevailing notion of enslaved people as passive laborers and brought attention to the violent and exploitative nature of the cotton industry. As a region-wide, organized effort, their acts of resistance disrupted the cotton plantation system and had reverberating effects on global cotton markets. The actions of enslaved people contributed to the broader abolitionist movement and eventually led to the end of the transatlantic slave trade and the abolition of slavery in the United States.

Additionally, the resistance of enslaved people in the Black Belt had significant implications for the global cotton market. By undermining production, they disrupted the flow of cotton from the American South to the textile mills of Europe and other regions. This disruption highlighted the vulnerabilities of the global cotton trade, which relied heavily on the exploitation of enslaved labor. During the United State’s Civil War and the ceasing of cotton production in the United States, global markets were forever altered and led to increased cultivation in regions like India, Egypt, and eventually China. This shift in global cotton production had lasting effects on the economies and societies of these regions.

Similarly, the civil rights movement in the Black Belt during the mid-20th century was transformative both socially and politically and sought to secure equal rights and end racial segregation and discrimination. While the movement is often associated with key figures and pivotal events in urban areas, its roots can be traced back to rural organizing efforts. 65 In rural areas, African American communities faced particularly severe forms of oppression and discrimination. 66 Rural African Americans laid the groundwork for the broader civil rights movement through grassroots organizing, community networks, and local activism, challenging racial inequality and demanding justice. 67 Their courageous efforts provided the foundation for the movement’s expansion, inspiring and mobilizing individuals nationwide to fight for civil rights and equality.

Due to these examples and many more, rural communities deserve to be cast as active agents in planetary change and form a base on which concepts of the ‘global rural’ should be built.

In conclusion, the theoretical works within the gradient category challenge spatial typologies and advocate for a holistic understanding of rural-urban systems. Terminologies like ‘hinterland’ and ‘countryside’ reinforce inequitable relationships, and the Black Belt exemplifies the agency of rural communities in shaping global dynamics. Recognizing rural areas as active agents in planetary change and developing new terminology that captures this complexity is crucial.

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63 See chapter three.
Network
Theories within the network category challenge linear development perceptions, arguing that the rural is valuable and a permanent spatial condition. While still utilizing typological categorization, they acknowledge the urbanization of the rural as well as the ruralization of the urban.

Comparing Contexts
The emergence of programatically complex regions in Asia has contributed significantly to the scholarly debate about the relationship between the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’. John Friedmann and Mike Douglass have contributed to this work by conceptualizing these spaces as Agropolitan and Timothy McGee, who introduces the concept of Desakota. These concepts provide valuable insights into the evolving relationship between rural and urban spaces, shedding light on the intricate development patterns and the emergence of new spatial configurations.

In “Agropolitan Development: towards a New Strategy for Regional Planning in Asia,” John Friedmann and Mike Douglass utilize the concept of the Agropolitan as an alternative model of rural development. Agropolitan Development perceives the rural and urban areas as interconnected nodes within a network. It emphasizes the interdependence and integration of rural and urban spaces, promoting collaboration and resource sharing. According to Friedmann and Douglass, the Agropolitan concept emphasizes the importance of developing rural regions not in isolation but in connection with urban centers. It recognizes that rural areas have the potential to contribute significantly to economic growth, social development, and environmental sustainability. Friedmann argues that the Agropolitan model can provide a viable strategy for achieving balanced regional development by harnessing the resources and capabilities of both rural and urban areas. The Agropolitan model seeks to counteract the phenomena of rural-urban migration and urban sprawl by promoting economic diversification, job creation, and improved living conditions in rural regions. It encourages the establishment of agro-industrial complexes, where agricultural production is linked to processing and manufacturing activities. By integrating agriculture, industry, and services, the Agropolitan model aims to create self-sustaining rural communities that offer employment opportunities, access to essential services, and improved quality of life for the rural population. It recognizes the potential of rural regions to contribute to national development and highlights the significance of spatial integration and interdependence between rural and urban areas.

Timothy McGee introduced the concept of Desakota in his work “The Emergence of Desakota Regions in Asia,” which offers another perspective on the rural-urban relationship. Desakota refers to the dynamic and blurred landscapes that emerge in the transitional zones between rural and urban areas in rapidly developing regions of Asia. McGee observed that as urbanization and industrialization progress, traditional rural and urban boundaries become increasingly porous, leading to the formation of Desakota regions. These regions are characterized by a mosaic of agricultural, residential, industrial, and commercial land uses, resulting in intricate spatial configurations and hybrid landscapes. The Desakota concept highlights the intermixing of economic activities, cultural practices, and social networks in these regions. McGee argues that Desakota regions are often the engines of economic growth, driving urbanization and providing employment opportunities for both rural and urban populations. Desakota regions demonstrate the coexistence of agricultural production, non-agricultural economic activities, and vibrant social interactions. They are characterized by intense land-use competition, rapid changes in land values, and the integration of traditional and modern production systems. McGee’s concept sheds light on the complexity of rural-urban dynamics in regions experiencing rapid transformation.

Both the Agropolitan and Desakota concepts are innovative and go far beyond theoretical framings of urban and rural, which are discussed in previous categories. Yet, there are still several components of their framing that are lacking. While advocating for rural agency and importance in a settlement network, both still retain elements of urban centrism. Within the Desakota framework, as soon as non-agricultural activities are inserted into the rural making it more economically sustainable, the space is reclassified as either Desakota or “peri-urban.” This framing asserts that rural space is defined solely by production and mono-economic structures rather than cultural and social practices. The Agropolitan concept is explained as the “city-in-the-fields” and encourages the adaptation of elements of urbanism into specific rural settings as a means of solving socio-economic problems. Though at a different scale than the dominant “urbanization of the rural” models, Agropolitan continues to cast the urban as the solution and the rural as the problem to be solved. Both Agropolitan and Desakota concepts could utilize a closer evaluation of rural social identity before suggesting that any form of livelihood improvement results in the creation of a new typology.

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The Region: Networked

While various works address regional planning, Lewis Mumford and Mike Douglass present valuable insights into the relationship between the rural and the urban as a networked system. Moving beyond the tokenism of regional planning of many of his predecessors, Lewis Mumford’s work acknowledges urban dependence on rural extraction and the value of multiple scales of social systems. He begins by critiquing metropolitan planning masquerading as regional planning. Distinguishing between the two, he states that metropolitan planning centers on a singular urban system and typically views the surrounding area as having potential for future development. In contrast, regional planning considers how population and resources can be distributed to “utilize rather than nullify or destroy” nature in relation to human occupation. Moving beyond the binary of urban and non-urban, he described regional planning to include cities, small towns, villages, and permanent rural areas. Multiple “land colonization” systems occur in rural spaces through patterns of extraction and abandonment. Mumford states that “no civilization can exist on this unsustainable and nomadic basis. In calling for environmental reform, Mumford also recognizes the benefits of multiple scales of social systems. In contrast to urban systems that are “committed to the mistakes of the past,” where change presents itself as complex and financially burdensome, small cities are more flexible. While towns have their own unique obstacles, their smaller physical and financial implications make them more approachable and offer opportunities for “the speedy utilization of new mechanical and scientific advantages.”

Mumford does not over-romanticize the rural, referencing the need for multiple scales of habitation that all draw from one another. While rural spaces provide natural resources and their own form of social structure, several institutional needs rely on large concentrations of the population for support that would be “futile to duplicate in small communities and unfortunate to do without.” Yet he points out that urban institutions often need specialization beyond what a single city can or should attempt to provide. He proposes that regional planning is necessary to distribute cancer hospitals, elite universities, and natural science museums across cities so that each can contribute to the regional network but not attempt to be the center of “every human function.” To achieve this goal, proper transportation infrastructure is required to facilitate the proper exchange of resources and experiences throughout the regional network. Though not expressly stated, Mumford’s analysis reveals the interconnected nature of rural and urban systems and their unequally weighted relationship, which calls for a more equitable exchange.

Mike Douglass also provides a Regional Network Strategy, which proposes the roles of both rural and urban spaces in regional exchange. Douglass offers his framework as a critique and alternative to Growth pole industrial diffusion models and envisions a regional network where rural and urban areas are interconnected spatially. He emphasizes the need for improved infrastructure, such as transportation and communication networks, to enhance connectivity between these spheres. This spatial integration enables the flow of goods, services, and people, facilitating economic activities and fostering regional development. Douglass highlights the diverse livelihood strategies present in both spheres, necessitating the recognition and support of different economic activities. The regional network strategy promotes the exchange of agricultural produce, raw materials, and manufactured goods between rural and urban areas, fostering economic diversification and enhancing the resilience of regional economies.

The network category challenges linear development perceptions by recognizing the value of rural spaces and emphasizing the interconnectedness of rural and urban areas. Overall, these perspectives provide a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the rural and urban, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and resource sharing for balanced regional development. Yet, they continue to center the urban and do not include the elements of other theoretical categories that have also proven true in the Black Belt.


Conclusion

Mr. Dameon Smith, in Jeffersonville, Georgia, described his work and living conditions separately with a rationale that places his lived experience in two separate theoretical categories of rural-urban relationships. Working at the Tyson distribution center in Macon, Georgia, he transports products from manufacturing centers to urban retailers, contributing to commodity flows from rural production to predominantly urban consumption. Yet he chooses to live in Jeffersonville, which he considers to be a rural area. When asked why, he said, “I love living here. I need to be close to nature. It’s a good place for families, and I can see a future for me here.” When discussing the social systems within the area, he referenced the ways in which communal spaces are regulated in Jeffersonville compared to Macon, stating, “In the city, the basketball courts are all locked up, while out here, they are open to everybody. People really spend time there and get to know each other. Everybody really does know everybody.” When asked what role rural areas play in the future of the US, Mr. Smith explained, “There are people that want to live here, and they should be able to.”

If looking at Mr. Smith’s life through his occupation, the rural-urban gradient theory is supported. Yet, in understanding his decisions about his relationship to natural and social systems, we understand the networked method in which he traverses spatial typologies. His utilization of urban space as an economic system, working and purchasing goods, and rural space as a place to build community leads us to question both spatial systems. Would Mr. Smith live in an urban area if he felt ‘everybody could know everybody’ and access public space equitably within an urban community? Would he work and shop in an urban area if more economic opportunities were offered in his rural town? How does Mr. Smith’s experience inform our understanding of the relationship between Jeffersonville and Macon?

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72 Mr. Dameon Smith is a pseudonym for an interview participant. He is a black, male between the age of 31-45 and identifies as living in a rural area.
While there are elements of each theoretical category in the Black Belt, they ultimately cannot co-exist, and none fully encompass the spatial and lived realities of the region.

**Binary**: While the Black Belt is a predominantly rural region, there are select locations that residents consider to be urban. Several residents expressed experiences of the rural-and-urban divide due to their lack of access to financial mobility and access to services. Yet all regional spatial conditions are linked through social, economic, and political systems.

**Exchange**: While residents of the Black Belt leverage both conditions they consider to be rural and urban to meet their individual needs, overall systems of exchange are inequitable. Still, there are those in the region who do not personally traverse spatial typologies. Larger systems of exchange are not predominantly inequitable between urban and rural areas in the Black Belt but between the region and the nation through ongoing extraction.

**Transect**: Individuals and administrations use categorical terms to describe conditions within the Black Belt, but they are frequently contested. Planning methodologies built on the transect concept have been largely unsuccessful, and their limitation of the rural as one category does not account for the diverse rural communities and conditions throughout the region.

**Gradient**: While the Black Belt does support urban space through methods of historic and ongoing extraction, rural residents have repeatedly shown that they have agency within rural space. Conceiving of the Black Belt as a part of the ‘global rural’ frames the region as an instigator and active participant in planetary systems. Even as spatial conditions are blurred and discussing these realities as “unbounded” creates provocative discussion, utilizing hyper-categorization to understand and name multiple rural experiences is a more productive method to counter urban normative frameworks.

**Network**: The creation of additional typological categories as well as regional thinking is the most applicable to the Black Belt of the five categories. Yet, regional theory must be carefully constructed not to center the urban, and the rural should not be framed as a typology to escape, as there are many social and cultural identities that exist outside of inequity.

This analysis has complicated our theoretical understanding of urban and rural relationships as well as rurality as a spatial typology.
CHAPTER 2

Practicing Design and Planning in the Black Belt

Edwards Mississippi
Introduction

Though design and planning theory does not represent rurality in the Black Belt Region, methodologies and tools of practice are being actively implemented. This analysis focuses on scales of action within the region, including the national scale, multi-state and multi-county regions, and local counties and municipalities. Additionally, this chapter explores how development, planning, and design relate to rural contexts within the Black Belt.

National Scale

National Rural Policy

Though there is a long history of national development and investment in rural space, current federal rural policy has a limited impact in rural communities. Unlike The Department of Housing and Urbanization’s (HUD) charge to serve urban development, no single national department leads rural development. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is often cast in this role, perpetuating the notion that rural policy is interchangeable with “agriculture policy.”

While agriculture has a strong cultural influence and is central to some rural economies, direct, on-farm employment accounted for only 1.4 percent of rural employment in 2020. Contrary to the popular narrative, the rural economy is diverse, comprised of office, sales, and food industries at 22 percent, with transportation and production comprising an additional 20 percent. This lack of acknowledgment of the economic transition in rural America has resulted in national rural policy, which is mainly in service to the agriculture industry and never reaches rural communities.

While a considerable number of federal programs seek to assist rural development, an overall comprehensive approach is lacking. A recent Brookings Institute report analyzing existing federal rural assistance identified “400 programs administered across 13 departments, 10 independent agencies, and regional commissions, and over 50 offices and sub-agencies,” which all support rural areas.

1 The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was established as a Cabinet Department by the Department of Housing and Urban Development Act (42 U.S.C. 3532-3537), effective November 9, 1965. While focused on Urban Development, the department does have a variety of programs that serve rural areas.
2 Although the Rural Development Policy Act of 1980 designated the USDA as the lead agency for coordinating rural development, I argue that this leadership was never actualized nor fully representative of rural communities.
3 Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, data from 2022. All data is based on the metro/non-metro definition of rural, which is highly critiqued in the introduction. Food and beverage stores, as well as the remaining agriculture-related industries, support another 6.6 million jobs. Data includes full-time and part-time jobs.
4 Ibid
In addition to a lack of cohesion in national federal policy, accessing funding from national programs is difficult for many rural communities. Funding eligibility requirements can lock out rural communities in several ways, including minimum threshold requirements, which rural communities are unable to meet due to the number of expected beneficiaries, as well as regulatory compliance requirements, which become a financial burden for communities with limited access to the required technical capacity of lawyers, engineers, accountants, and other professional services. While facing these barriers, rural communities are frequently in competition for funding with urban areas. For example, The Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG) allocates approximately 70 percent of its yearly funds to urban areas as ‘entitlement communities’ while non-entitlement communities range from 30 to 130 annually.9 The report “The Path to Rural Resilience in America” offers an array of solutions for federal funds to have a more direct impact in rural communities, including creating a participatory grantmaking program, providing direct funding streams for essential public services, streamlining application processes, and moving away from a top-down approach to fund allocation, allowing local communities to have more autonomy over their use.10

The urgency of challenges facing rural communities makes a strong case for federal leadership to create a comprehensive policy agenda for Rural America that promotes equity and economic development. To do so, there is a considerable amount of work to be done, including evaluating how ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ or ‘metro’ and ‘non-metro’ are defined to address the evolving diversity of rural communities, creating more transparency within the fund distribution system to better understand the financial impacts of federal programs in rural areas, and updating the legislative organizational structures to give rural communities agency within the federal system.


6 Many of these programs use different federal definitions of ‘rural’ and ‘urban,’ which were outlined in the introduction, further complicating rural communities’ access to services as they often have to bear the burden of proving whether or not they qualify for ‘rural’ assistance.

7 Rural agency within the legislative system and electoral system are in tension.

8 Pipa and Geismar 2020

9 Ibid

National Policy Impacts on the Black Belt

The history of racial discrimination in national rural policy has profoundly impacted the Black Belt, contributing to regional inequality. Federal intervention in the region from Reconstruction through the New Deal Era was centered on the need for labor as a top legislative priority. While the controlling party of the time, the Southern Congressional Democrats, insulated the region and greatly opposed federal intervention, national leaders were also incentivized to ‘not disrupt’ racial discrimination due to their dependence on the continuation of the plantation economy. Detrimental to Black economic growth, national policies continued to support White landowners and the debt peonage, sharecropping system. The Atlantic’s article titled “The Great Land Robbery” explains that in the early 20th century, there were nearly one million Black farmers in the country, owning approximately 15 million acres of land. However, due to a combination of discriminatory practices, including racist lending policies and unequal access to government subsidies, the number of Black farmers has dramatically declined. By 2017, there were only around 45,000 Black farmers nationally, owning just over 4 million acres of land. The resulting displacement and loss of generational wealth disproportionately affected the Black Belt Region. National recognition of Black land loss was achieved through the Pigford vs. Glickman lawsuit in 1999, in which a 1.15 billion dollar settlement was reached, exposing the ongoing prejudicial practices of the USDA and highlighting the difficulty Black farmers faced in reclaiming their stolen land.

History of National Rural Policy Racial Discrimination

1862 - Morrill Land Grant Act creation of land grant institutions responsible for agricultural and technical education which did not admit African American students.

1936 - Rural Electrification Act created in response to the economic crisis but was specifically instructed not to “disrupt the existing ratio of production between agricultural areas” or “increase the percentage of tenancy,” resulting in discrimination through the perpetuation of existing systemic racism.

New Deal USDA Farmers Home Administration Program was not expanded to include non farm households until 1961 excluding all non land owners. Farm payments largely went to white landowners instead of sharecroppers and tenant farms, resulting in mass displacement and dissension of African American farmers in the Black Belt.

1877 - Federal Troops are removed from the Southern US excluded 60% of African Americans by leaving out farmworkers and domestic labor.

1914 Smith-Lever Act created the Cooperative Extension Service employed a segregated model with disproportional allocations of resources and funding.

1935 - Social Security Act excluded African Americans by leaving out farmworkers and domestic labor.

1943 - Farm Labor Act prevented the expenditure of federal funds for the transportation of agricultural workers out of a county without the permission of the county farm agent, limiting black labor opportunities.


Rural Development

Several conceptualizations of ‘development’ exist with differing priorities and methodologies. Michael Woolcock describes national and large-scale development as “history in a hurry,” or the deployment of reason and resources in support of the nation-state as a collective. Throughout history, the development of a comprehensive rural development theory has been through several phases, which can be divided into three specific approaches: exogenous, endogenous, and neo-endogenous.

Emerging in the post-WWII period in Europe, the exogenous development model views rural areas as dependent on urban centers and primarily responsible for providing food and resources to expanding urban populations. This model operates within a narrow productivist policy frame and views rural areas as a residual category, equating it with the sector category of agriculture. The first phase of the model included consolidation of farm structures, land improvement schemes, and the development of farm-oriented infrastructure, while the second phase aimed to attract new types of employment to rural areas through tourism, supporting firms to relocate to rural settings, and investing in transportation and communication links between urban and rural areas. The exogenous model had its successes, such as increased employment rates, improvements in technology, communication, and infrastructure, as well as combating prolonged rural depopulation in some instances. However, it was heavily criticized for promoting dependency on external investment and creating a democratic deficit due to its non-participatory nature.

These critiques eventually resulted in the development of the endogenous model to address the ‘productivist myopia of rural policy’ and the top-down governance approach. Developing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the model posits that technological progress is not an exogenous force but instead endogenous, meaning it is driven by internal factors such as investment in research and development, education, and human capital. Largely in response to economic transitions away from agriculture, the model shifts from sectoral supports to territorial development and spatial approaches. Examples of the model’s multi-sectorial and multi-scalar initiatives can be seen in Japan, Chile, and the European Union’s Liaisons Entre Actions de Développement de l’Economie Rurale (LEADER) Program. Each example shows differing manifestations of similar core components: economic development that focuses on the retention of benefits for rural communities through the utilization of existing internal assets and the contextualization of needs, capacities, and perspectives of local people. The model is largely critiqued due to its participatory component, as there is uneven participation, and dominant, more powerful members of groups are often favored. While the model attempts to redistribute agency from centralized power to the local citizenry, certain policy areas operate at a larger scale and remain unaccounted for within the tight local focus of the Endogenous Development model.

While the exogenous and endogenous models were created predominantly based on European contexts, the virtuous cycle model was both developed and critiqued based on a larger representation of global studies. The inclusion of the global south in the building of a theoretical model for rural development complicates exogenous and endogenous models, as many of the needs and challenges rural communities face differ across the Brandt Line. As a conceptual model, the virtuous cycle was developed by several practitioners over time and is defined as a model of urban-rural development which focuses on opening agricultural distribution beyond local markets to raise rural incomes.

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### Exogenous Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor Focus</th>
<th>economic growth is driven primarily by external factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key principle</td>
<td>economies of scale and concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic force</td>
<td>urban growth poles; the main forces of development conceived as emanating from outside rural areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function of rural areas</td>
<td>food and other primary production for the expanding urban economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major rural area problems</td>
<td>low productivity and peripherality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of rural development</td>
<td>agricultural industrialization and specialization; encouragement of labour and capital mobility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Critique of Exogenous Model

| dependent development | reliant on continued subsidies and the policy decision of distant agencies or boardrooms |
| distorted development | which boosts single sectors, selected settlements and certain types of business, but leaves others behind and neglects non-economic aspects of rural life |
| destructive development | erases the cultural and environmental differences of rural areas |
| dictated development | devised by external experts and planners |

### Endogenous Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor Focus</th>
<th>emphasizes the role of internal factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key principle</td>
<td>the specific resources of an area [natural, human and cultural] hold the key to its sustainable development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic force</td>
<td>local initiative and enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function of rural areas</td>
<td>diverse service economies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major rural area problems</td>
<td>limited capacity of areas and social groups to participate in economic and development activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of rural development</td>
<td>capacity building (skills, institutions and infrastructure); overcoming social exclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Critique of Endogenous Model

| inequity | favor only certain, and more powerful, social groups |
| clientism | associated with a clientelist system of local governance and corruption |
| participation | limited participation of marginal groups such as unemployed people and young people |
| scale | certain policy areas such as agricultural production policy, taxation, and transport infrastructure policy remain strongly exogenous in their outlook |
### Virtuous Circle Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor Focus</th>
<th>Economy experiences a positive feedback loop of growth and development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key principle</td>
<td>Linkages and feedback loops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic force</td>
<td>Rural-urban linkages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function of rural areas</td>
<td>Agricultural production and material supply but with diverse service economies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major rural area problems</td>
<td>Mono economic systems and low quality of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of rural development</td>
<td>Higher incomes from the production of agricultural goods for non-local markets spur demand for food and other consumer goods, leads to non-agriculture specific job creation and economic diversification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Neo-Endogenous Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor Focus</th>
<th>Rural-urban, local-global</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key principle</td>
<td>Socio-spatial justice and balancing local needs while competing for extra-local people, resources, skills and capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic force</td>
<td>Fostering a new urban-rural and local-global relationship through inclusive, multisectoral and multi-sectoral governance arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function of rural areas</td>
<td>Sustaining rural livelihoods, while maintaining natural capital uses (including housing, services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major rural area problems</td>
<td>Exclusive countrysides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of rural development</td>
<td>Place-making and community wellbeing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Critique of Virtuous Circle Model

- Model assumes that proximity to urban markets improves farmers' access to the inputs and services required to increase agricultural productivity.
- Model implicitly views markets as perfect competitive realms of impersonal economic exchange.
- Model's starting point is that activities in rural and urban areas are sectorally distinguished.
- Required conditions do not exist, such as relatively equitable distribution of land ownership, a high concentration of small farms producing high-value crops, and a location sufficiently far from other major centres.

- Model's starting point is that activities in rural and urban areas are sectorally distinguished.
- Required conditions do not exist, such as relatively equitable distribution of land ownership, a high concentration of small farms producing high-value crops, and a location sufficiently far from other major centres.
distribution to reduce competition between distribution centers.\textsuperscript{26} While the existence of each factor within a community is rare, the implementation of the model is limited.\textsuperscript{27}

Despite the predominantly linear development of the three models, they are not uniformly applied in practice and are instead utilized in an ongoing manner. Many countries in the global south, including China, have continued to employ modernization discourses in policies such as industrialization, market liberalization, and land reform.\textsuperscript{28} China has embraced modernization through a multi-dimensional approach, including infrastructure development, urbanization, and social modernization initiatives. China’s rural economy and labor market have been diversified, with non-agricultural employment increasing significantly. Industrialization and economic growth have improved living standards and led to consumerism. However, disparities in wealth between rural and urban areas and spatial disparities in wealth within the Chinese rural landscapes have also increased, leading to criticism and challenges to some elements of rural modernization in China.

Acknowledging the failures of existing models, neo-endogenous development has emerged as an attempt to integrate internal and external networks, brokering connections between the urban-rural and the local-global relationships.\textsuperscript{29} The new model stresses the interconnection of rural regions and the potential for transferring ideas and examples between rural communities in the global north and the global south.\textsuperscript{30} Despite the apparent differences in rural communities’ challenges, such as adjusting to declining agriculture in the global north and poverty, undernourishment, and lack of access to clean water in the global south, there are commonalities and opportunities for exchanging ideas and approaches. For instance, payments for environmental services, ecotourism, and community-centered approaches to rural development have been utilized in both the global north and south. Additionally, some scholars argue that the Black Belt has served as a colony to the greater United States and, as a result, has developed to contain challenges and issues similar to several of those of regions of the global south.\textsuperscript{31} As such, the Black Belt serves as a critical region in which to explore sustainable forms of rural development.


\textsuperscript{27} Tacoli 1998

\textsuperscript{28} Woods 2011

\textsuperscript{29} Lowe, Gkartzios 2019

\textsuperscript{30} Woods 2011

In conclusion, national policies focused on rural development have failed mainly due to a misunderstanding of rural America and the significant harm caused by racial discrimination, particularly in the Black Belt. The current national approach still adheres to the exogenous model, which views rural areas as dependent on urban centers and primarily focused on agriculture. However, for the sake of rural communities, a transition to neo-endogenous models is necessary. Neo-endogenous development emphasizes the interconnection of rural regions and promotes the transfer of ideas and approaches between rural communities globally, addressing the specific needs and challenges they face. This shift is crucial to promote equity and economic development and empower rural communities within the national policy framework.

**Regional: Multi-State**

While many issues facing rurality today need to be addressed globally and nationally, regional thinking represents unique opportunities to address the specific ways problems and opportunities manifest in varying rural regions.

**Rural Regionalism**

The region represents a fundamental category for understanding the division of space. While the five theoretical categories in chapter one explored regionalism through rural and urban relationships, understanding the rural region is critical for rural development. Rural regions are diverse in terms of the development problems faced as well as the viability of potential solutions.

Rural Regions are often defined by the ecological systems they were developed within. John Hart defines the ‘rural landscape’ as a physical environment that serves as a complex system composed of natural and built features which have evolved over time and are shaped by ecological and cultural processes. As such, rurality quickly reaches a regional scale due to the expansive nature of ecological and cultural systems that often cross jurisdictional boundaries. In McHarg’s seminal work “Design with Nature,” he introduces ‘ecological regionalism’ and emphasizes the importance of designing human settlements in harmony with natural systems to avoid ecological damage and create sustainable environments. Regional planning is crucial to design and address environmental challenges affecting rural communities and balance water, land, and resource utilization and protection.

**Regional Authorities**

There are many forms of rural regional planning among a variety of actors and organizations, including private companies, discipline-based boards, and institutions. Yet limited resources and longevity have proved challenging for their success. At a federal scale, Congress has approved eight main regional authorities over.

Almost a century after the work of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) and the New Deal Era establishment of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Regional Planning in the United States has been through multiple transitions. After the mixed success of the TVA, which provides electricity to 10 million people in largely rural areas but has relinquished any serious role in regional planning leadership, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) was given a different mission and development model. In contrast to the TVA’s focus on “top-down development,” the ARC was created in 1965 to address poverty in its respective region by developing small-scale, decentralized projects that were to be “place-based.” The authority has had success through the construction of the Appalachian Development Highway System, which has improved the region’s transportation infrastructure, and the funding of the Appalachian Leadership Institute, which provides leadership training for emerging leaders in the region. While the ARC has been successful in promoting economic development in the region, it has also faced criticism over the years, as “they have enacted over 28,000 development plans and spent $4.5 billion since 1956, but Appalachia...” Finding this balance often comes into direct tension with economic development. Due to the “economics of scale,” many individual rural economies are no longer able to sustain themselves based on natural systems alone. The influence of globalization has altered the scale at which rural regions must operate, requiring them to interact effectively in the global economy. Traditional rural development strategies have typically focused on recruiting new businesses at the county level, which has resulted in communities competing with one another rather than working together. Regional planning that builds upon unique assets and promotes collaboration across jurisdictional boundaries is crucial to overcome this challenge.

Region is still relatively impoverished in comparison to the rest of the United States. Some argue that the ARC has not done enough to address the root causes of poverty in the region, such as the decline of the coal industry and the lack of investment in education and workforce development. Others point to the Commission’s relatively small budget compared to the size of the region it serves, which limits its ability to make a significant impact.

Several decades later, the Delta Regional Authority was created as the second congressionally commissioned region. Comprised of 252 counties across eight states, the region has faced significant economic challenges due to its reliance on agriculture, a lack of investment, and poor infrastructure. The DRA has effectively brought together public and private partners to work on economic development initiatives and invested in various projects, including infrastructure development, small business development, and workforce training programs. Some of the DRA’s most significant achievements include constructing new healthcare facilities, developing new business incubators, and expanding high-speed internet access across the region.

**Fighting for a Black Belt Regional Authority**

As rural poverty reduction was one of the main drivers behind the creation of regional development authorities, it might lead one to wonder why the Black Belt, the region with the nation’s highest persistent poverty rates, was not at the forefront of this initiative. Veronica Womack’s book “Abandonment in Dixie” provides a history of the Black Belt’s fight for a regional authority. In the 1960s, the United States government was focused on fighting poverty, and as a part of this effort, they created the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) to provide economic assistance to the Appalachian region, as previously mentioned. At the same time, the government also recognized the Black Belt South as an area in need of economic aid. However, while the ARC was established in 1965, the Black Belt region did not receive its own commission. The government did not provide any clear explanation for this decision, but it is worth noting that the Civil Rights movement was gaining momentum during the same time period.

With the development of the Delta Regional Authority in 2000, discussions of creating a commission in the Black Belt were reignited. Over time, four groups emerged, which were ‘dissimilar in political experience, occupational background, race, class, and life experiences,’ representing six states. In October of 2001, the groups met to merge the research that each had conducted to create a united vision towards a regional commission. Disputes quickly became apparent regarding governance models, economic development, and, most significantly, how race was to be addressed. Representing one group, Senator Zell Miller of Georgia was quoted saying, “Poverty—not race—should be the guiding principle in my opinion,” and while the Southeastern Crescent Authority (SECA) stated they were “making all efforts to include diversity,” their steering committee was composed of all white males. The Black Belt Initiative group, which had previously worked with local Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and citizen stakeholders in the region to develop the “Persistent Poverty in the South: A Community-Based Perspective Report,” argued that the commission needed to directly address the ongoing history of systemic racism in the region. The meeting was unsuccessful, and the efforts resulted in the development of three separate and unique bills, which Congress rejected.

Even with the collective intention to improve the livelihood of those living in the Black Belt, the four groups were unable to overcome the longstanding mistrust and hostility that had been developed and passed down through multiple generations. Of the three bills presented, only one mentioned the “Black Belt” in its title. While there is no assurance that the term contributed to its rejection, the continued negative associations of racial acknowledgment at a national level is reflected in policy.

Through the Black Belt Regional Authority bill did not pass in Congress, the work of the Tuskegee University community-based focus groups was documented and compiled, creating a compelling grassroots vision for a regional commission. While eager for a formal authority, the groups voiced concern over the ARC’s governance structure and proposed a more community-based and direct resident participation model. They proposed the development of a Constituency Representation Board, which consisted of representatives from each congressional district as well as members of local community-based groups, faith-based organizations, and higher learning institutions. The inclusion of a broad range of representatives was identified as an attempt to have direct contact with the local population as a response to the weak political institutions and the disconnect between governmental bodies and Black residents. Additionally, they called for a structure that directly addresses the Black Belt’s history of class and race exclusion. They proposed the development of a transparent funds distribution system that enabled participatory decision-making. Many of the findings and proposals made within the Black Belt Regional Authority continue to be relevant today and should continue to be referenced.

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$250,000 from Congress for a feasibility study

University of Georgia focused on business community stakeholders, state agencies, 1860s historically white land-grant institutions, and census statistics of the region.

Tuskegee University focused on community-based organizations, 1890s historically black land-grant Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and citizen stakeholders within the region.

Tuskegee University’s Annual Professional Agricultural Worker’s Conference

$25,000,000 from Congress for a feasibility study

Black Belt Initiative

"individuals, communities, organizations, educational institutions and government agencies which seek to improve social, economic, health and educational standing of the Black Belt Counties of the South."

Southeast Crescent Regional Commission (SCRC) Created by the Farm Bill

First Federal Co-Chair Appointed by the Senate

History of Black Belt Regional Commission Creation
The Southeast Crescent

In 2008, six years after the three separate bills were proposed, the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission (SCRC) was created by the farm bill in addition to two other regional commissions. The SCRC’s governance structure was directly modeled after the ARC, which was already being critiqued for effectiveness, with little to no change and in no way responding to the local recommendations made in the Black Belt Regional Authority’s bill. Since 2008, Congress has authorized $1.5 million dollars in funding, of which only $33 million dollars have been utilized due to the delayed appointment of a federal co-chair until 2021. Originally a part of the 1990s effort to form a commission, Ava Gabrielle Wise drove across seven states, speaking with community activists and their members of Congress to advocate for the appointment of a co-chair in 2019. Wise was quoted saying, “I’ve traveled for hours on bad roads with bad infrastructure with no cell phone service,” all in an effort to access funds already allocated.

After Jennifer Clyburn Reed was appointed SCRC’s first Federal Co-Chair, the commission began work and published the “Southeast Crescent Regional Commission Strategic Plan (2023-2027)” in December 2022. While the report is promising and offers several important insights into the region, its specific analysis of issues pertaining to rural communities and racial inequity is uneven and not well-developed. The greatest acknowledgment of racial injustice is addressed in relation to housing and is the only time in the document that the origin of a specific disparity is explored. In stating the current context – “The gap in homeownership rates between Black and White families today is wider than it was before the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968,” and acknowledging, “redlining played a central role in creating racial inequity and racial injustice in U.S. housing.” Yet the reference is contained to a widely publicized form of discrimination that occurred at a national scale without offering any regional or rural-specific forms of racial inequity that occurred and are ongoing in the Black Belt. One issue that is included that has a racially disproportionate effect is in reference to heir’s property which states, “heirs’ property – a practice of passing ownership to an heir without a will – accounts for more than onethird of Southern Black-owned land totaling 3.5 million acres and with an estimated value of more than $28 billion.” Race is also referenced within business goals by celebrating Black entrepreneurs stating that, “four SCRC member States were ranked among the top 10 states for Black entrepreneurs,” and outlines intentions to improve minority-owned businesses and firms’ access to funding through specific programs. While objectives towards environmental preservation aim to “Invest in air, water, and soil clean-up efforts that impact historically disadvantaged communities,” race is not explicitly mentioned, regardless of the significant connection between Black communities and environmental inequity in the Black Belt. Overall racial inequity is referenced in 3 out of the 14 specific goals outlined.

While rural communities are referenced more frequently than racial inequity, rural-specific problems and solutions are not acknowledged. When referenced, rurality is frequently attached to the end of a statement such as “…especially in rural communities,” framing rural problems as an extension rather than an area for unique intervention. This conceptualization is further demonstrated in relation to infrastructure as solutions to provision are described as “expanding services to support rural areas,” which sets up rural service reliance on existing urban systems and discounts rural-specific infrastructure or decentralized models. There is an acknowledgment of a “rural-urban divide” in business and job opportunities stating, “Companies traditionally look to urban centers when considering relocation sites, thereby further widening the divide that isolates rural and other economically distressed communities.” Yet, no solution is offered to improve rural access to economic opportunities or job training. Even in the image captions, the commission’s approach to rural and urban communities can be differed as names are given to specific urban regions, “Houston Medical Center in Warner Robins, Georgia.” In contrast, an image of a power line running along a field is titled “rural area in Southwest Florida.”

In April 2022, the SCRC launched a survey to gain resident perspectives to inform the Strategic Plan. The responses collected were discriminated throughout the document in the form of statistics backing up specific goals and quotes elevating the voices of Black Belt people. While the survey contributed to the robustness of the document and provided insight into community values and priorities, only 15 percent of the respondents identified as Black or African American, while 21 percent identified as White or Caucasian, which in no way represents the demographic composition of the Black Belt Region. Also, no distinction was made towards rural residents, so identifying their inclusion in the survey is not possible. When interviews were conducted towards the development of this thesis in January of 2023, all of the twelve local actors interviewed had yet to be contacted by or reached out to the SCRC. One multi-county regional planner was aware of the steps taken by the SCRC, stating, “We haven’t seen any action from them, an online survey went out about a year ago, but that’s it. I hope they end up being a valuable resource because we could use it.”

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47 For more information, reference chapter three.
Southeast Crescent Regional Commission
Strategic Plan (2023-2021): Review

Invest in Critical Infrastructure

1.1 Expand the region’s basic water and sewer infrastructure to be more resilient
1.2 Expand and improve access to affordable and reliable digital infrastructure
1.3 Support expanded regional transportation infrastructure systems and transit services

Improve Health and Support Services Access and Outcomes

2.1 Support initiatives that expand access to affordable, high-quality healthcare and services that support overall mental and physical health
2.2 Provide support to build capacity for navigating and accessing support services

Strengthen Workforce Capacity

3.1 Promote workforce development programs for local high-demand job opportunities
3.2 Increase enrollment in and completion of critical training programs by investing in wrap-around services

Foster Entrepreneurial Business and Development Activities

4.1 Support the expansion of access to business capital to support innovation, entrepreneurship and economic equity
4.2 Invest in programs and business opportunities that address critical challenges facing SCRC communities while providing opportunities to attract and retain talent locally

Expand Affordable Housing Stock and Access

5.1 Increase access to wrap around services and legal assistance to resolve title, heirship, land tenure, and eviction issues.
5.2 Support enrollment in and access to homebuyer programs
5.3 Invest in efforts to improve the affordability and availability of quality housing across the region

Promote Environmental Conservation, Preservation, and Access

6.1 Invest in air, water and soil clean-up efforts that impact historically disadvantaged communities
6.2 Preserve and expand access to the SCRC region’s natural resources to increase outdoor recreation and tourism opportunities
**Rural Planning**

For an extended period, planning practice and research were preoccupied with industrialization and its urban outcomes. Though periods of counterurbanization during the second half of the twentieth-century reignited interest in rural spaces, rural planning has failed to remain a consistent and well-resourced area of study. If the term ‘planning’ is to retain any relevance and currency, the discipline needs to work with a multiplicity of actors and scales to understand and interact with rurality more broadly.

Urban Planning has remained an important area of study and is often implied when the term ‘planning’ is used. David Harvey defined planning as a process that involves the regulation and organization of urban space in order to achieve economic, political, and social goals. For Harvey, planning is a tool that can be used to shape the physical and social structure of cities in ways that reflect the values and priorities of those who hold power.50 Similarly, Yvonne Rydin describes planning as a means by which society collectively decides what change should be like and tries to achieve that vision by a mix of means.51 Both Harvey and Rydin’s general conceptions of actors and interventions toward the creation of space are relevant to rurality; the unique goals and practices of non-urban economic, political, and social practices need to be considered within the planning discipline.

Moving away from the idea of ‘planning as a universal’ and siloed urban normativity, Indigenous Planning has emerged as a distinctive practice that derives from an “indigenous worldview, which not only serves to unite (Indigenous Planning) philosophically but also to distinguish it from neighboring non-land based communities."52 Through a collaborative and ongoing process, Porter defines Indigenous Planning as “indigenous people making decisions about their place (whether in the built or natural environment) using their knowledge (and other knowledges), values and principles to define and progress their present and future social, cultural, environmental and economic aspirations.” The “spatialization of indigeneity” is not confined to a particular typology or conceptualization of space and occurs in the urban and the rural.53

While not pertaining to a specific nation or people, rural planning similarly foregrounds the relationship between humans and ecological systems. Wayne Caldwell described Rural Planning as “the process of planning for rural areas, with a focus on rural issues and from a rural perspective.” At the same time, relying heavily on the definition of the rural, Caldwell’s definition challenges the planning discipline.

While Regional Commissions within the US have the potential to offer unique planning potential to rural communities, their focus on development has hindered spatial planning efforts. Though the Black Belt has been a focus of regional discussions since commission formalization began nearly a century ago, Black-rural communities are still underrepresented. While the Southern Crescent Regional Commission has been established, and their work has called attention to racial disparity, much is left to be desired in comparison to the goals outlined by the Black Belt Regional Commission in 2001. Additionally, the segmentation of the Black Belt Region into three regional administrative boundaries has divided responsibility for the region, preventing a holistic approach and creating a lack of ownership, which has the potential to lead to neglect.

Multi-State Regional Authority Recommendations:

- Create a Black Belt Region joint task force between the Delta Regional Authority and the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission.
- Task Force partners with public and private groups who are researching systemic racism in the Black Belt to create a publication aimed at providing historical context to existing issues faced in the region. The document will serve as a base point for the creation of future actionable items.
- Conduct a second region-wide survey that utilizes existing local leaders for "planning" as procedural and normative while emphasizing the importance of planners’ individual perspectives. Rural Planners today also challenge past perceptions of rural planning as ‘territory planning’ or ‘countryside management’ relegated to large-scale land-use planning but as a complex practice where environmental systems are critical to the development of social, political, and economic systems.55 This flipping of environmental systems from ‘something to control’ to a ‘system that enables’ has evolved throughout rural study. Frank and Hibbard further this approach, conceptualizing Rural Planning as a human-landscape system, where rural planning is responsible for understanding and shaping the interconnected and dynamic relationship between humans and the ‘natural’ environment.56

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

While Regional Commissions within the US have the potential to offer unique planning potential to rural communities, their focus on development has hindered spatial planning efforts. Though the Black Belt has been a focus of regional discussions since commission formalization began nearly a century ago, Black-rural communities are still underrepresented. While the Southern Crescent Regional Commission has been established, and their work has called attention to racial disparity, much is left to be desired in comparison to the goals outlined by the Black Belt Regional Commission in 2001. Additionally, the segmentation of the Black Belt Region into three regional administrative boundaries has divided responsibility for the region, preventing a holistic approach and creating a lack of ownership, which has the potential to lead to neglect.

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- Conduct a second region-wide survey that utilizes existing local leaders for...
dissemination with the specific goal of reaching a larger percentage of Black community members.

- Utilize the survey process to build a decentralized network of local leaders representing communities through various organization types.
- Require that each authority’s strategic plan specifically addresses the issues and assets of rural communities, not disconnecting them from urban areas but calling out their unique qualities.
- Create a transparent fund distribution system that includes participatory decision-making processes.

Regional: Multi-County

Multi-County Regions in the Black Belt

While multi-state regional authorities focus predominantly on development in their respective administrative boundaries, they rarely conduct any form of spatial planning outside of large-scale infrastructure projects. Spatial planning in the Black Belt is primarily the responsibility of multi-county, quasi-government agencies, which are created, funded, and given specific charges by the state. This study focuses on three authorities in three separate states, the Central Mississippi Planning and Development District (CMPDD), the South Central Alabama Development Commission (SCADC), and the Middle Georgia Regional Commission (MGRC). All three are charged with several responsibilities outside of planning, including social services and management of existing systems.

Each of the commissions studied takes differing approaches to their role as local planners. The Central Mississippi PPD plays the most formal role. With 4 registered planners on staff, they serve as consultants to county and city administrations. A staff member explained, “We are an effective source for them to share expertise and knowledge. They don’t have to go out and hire those people but have built-in access. We offer preestablished place-based knowledge.” While developing plans for individual communities, they do not conduct comprehensive planning for the 7 counties in their charge as a whole. Both the South Central Alabama DC and the Middle Georgia RC provide technical services to local government and create regional scale plans. The South Central Alabama DC focuses predominantly on economic development and infrastructure provisions such as water, sewage, and parks. They do not currently have any planners on staff. The Middle Georgia RC conducts spatial planning at both an 11-county scale as well as the individual county and municipality scale. While each organization takes a different approach to planning and has varying requirements from the state, they face similar administrative challenges:

Regulatory Burden: While each commission’s deliverables vary across the three states, each has a set of imposed regulations. Georgia’s legislation is the most
stringent, requiring every county and municipality to have its own comprehensive plan that is updated every 5 years.\footnote{57 Georgia Planning Act (O.C.G.A. 45-12-200, et seq., and 50-8-1, et seq.)} While the actualization of this goal has the potential to benefit local communities, there is not enough capacity for each planning process to be innovative or specific, resulting in the frequent recycling of ideas with no proof of effectiveness. A regional planner expressed their frustration with the requirements stating, “We were required to create 13 comprehensive plans, 2 regional plans, and an economic development plan in the last two years. We felt like we just had to crank them out... There wasn’t a lot of time to experiment or do much community engagement.”

Public Planners as Consultants: While the planning relationship is meant to reduce costs, many local administrators expressed that the structure effectively limited their options. A local town planner stated, “If I wanna go to somebody else, I can’t validate spending the additional funds to the board.” In Mississippi, local municipalities are required to use the regional planner’s services.\footnote{58 Mississippi Code Title 57 – Planning, Research, and Development Chapter 1 - Mississippi Development Authority.} Another municipal leader shared, “I once opened a draft of our new comprehensive plan, and it had (the wrong town’s) name on the front. The planners had just copied and pasted it. They didn’t incorporate anything from all our conversations. I paid for this plan. I was required to use them.” A local designer in Mississippi explains the reasoning for the existing structure, “The bureaucracy is put in place to maintain state power and control. Requiring each town to use the same planners just gives the state legislature direct access to specific rural communities. It’s just a new form of top-down governance.” Here it is important to note that the Planning and Development Districts were developed in the late 1960s, and while their intentions for the program were not made abundantly clear, legislation designed to relocate Black communities outside of Mississippi and subvert the newly passed federal voting rights act were crafted during the same session.\footnote{59 Dittmer, John. 1994. Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi. Blacks in the New World. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.}

Administrative Boundaries: In addition to setting the required deliverables and services provided to local communities, the state drew the existing administrative boundaries for each multi-county region. The Central Mississippi PPD and Middle Georgia RC’s boundaries physically represent everything Mumford critiques about municipal planning masquerading as regional planning.\footnote{60 See chapter one.} A regional planner in Mississippi expressed, “The seven counties are a manageable size, but working with the capital city has its challenges. Everything is centered around Jackson, resources, time, everything.” Two additional scenarios are proposed for investigating the impacts of existing administrative boundaries, each containing a series of positive and negative elements. The first scenario presents a multi-county region composed of all predominantly rural counties, similar to the South...
Central Alabama Development Commission (SCADC). A rural-focused region has the potential to address specific challenges that emerge within rural contexts and address them accordingly. Such a region would also reduce administrative hierarchies, allowing the commission to maintain an equal relationship with each county and municipality. Yet, the most significant limitation of the exclusion of an urban area that is geographically adjacent is the commission’s limited agency to address any rural challenges that are related to urban-rural relationships. The final scenario aims not to exclude the urban but to include multiple scales of urban space in an attempt to center the rural. A commission that has agency in multiple rural and urban spaces has the potential to diffuse administrative focus and to conceive of their relationships as a network.

As a discipline, planning is inaccessible primarily to local communities in the Black Belt. While the availability of quasi-public planning institutions provides a certain amount of support, they exist within a structure that still does not address the needs of rural communities. This has the potential to cause damage as the rapid creation and publication of comprehensive plans give the semblance of progress, disguising the continued need for spatial planning.

Limitations of Planning Tools and Methods

Traditionally, planning practice utilizes the three main methods of implementation, which are characterized as the ‘three-legged stool’ of law, finance, and politics. Yet planners deploy a large variety of tools and methods, and each can be organized along two perpendicular axes, from the spatial to the programmatic and from the regulatory to the aspirational or vision setting.

Agricultural Zoning is typically held as an example of “rural-specific” planning. Utilized nationally, agricultural zoning typically aims to prevent the subdivision of land into smaller parcels for non-farm residential use, reduce nuisance by minimizing conflicts between residential and agricultural activity, and preserve ‘rural character.’ Several zoning methods have been deployed to achieve these goals with varying results, including large lot zones, fixed area-based allocation zones, and sliding scale area-based allocation zones.


Many of the prominent works on Agricultural Zoning are outdated. New studies need to be conducted to have a more adequate understanding of Rural Planning in the United States on a National Scale.
large lot zones, also known as minimum lot size requirements, are a form of agricultural zoning that establishes a minimum size for agricultural parcels. These zones require that agricultural land be divided into larger plots, often to maintain the rural character of an area or to support specific types of agricultural activities that require more extensive land holdings. By enforcing minimum lot sizes, large lot zones help prevent the fragmentation of agricultural land and encourage the preservation of larger-scale agricultural operations.

Fixed area-based allocation zones allocate specific areas of land exclusively for agricultural purposes. These zones set aside designated areas where agricultural activities are the primary use, and other types of development, such as residential or commercial, are typically restricted or prohibited. Fixed area-based allocation zones can be effective in preserving the agricultural character of an area, promoting agricultural production, and preventing encroachment by non-agricultural development.

Sliding-scale area-based allocation zones, also known as transfer of development rights (TDR) programs, provide a flexible approach to agricultural zoning. These zones allow for the transfer of development rights from agriculturally valuable lands to designated receiving areas. Landowners in the agricultural zone can sell their development rights to developers or landowners in the receiving area, thereby preserving the agricultural land while allowing for development in more suitable locations. Sliding scale area-based allocation zones provide a market-based mechanism to maintain agricultural land and accommodate development where it is more compatible.

While Agricultural Zoning has supported some rural communities, it is limited to addressing rurality as a form of production, as no other rural-specific design mechanisms have gained as much prominence. In the Black Belt, any form of zoning is limited, including agricultural zoning, as state legislation in both Alabama and Mississippi do not allow restrictions to be placed on agricultural land, even towards protecting its use.64 Several ‘Right to Farm’ laws have been put into place which aim to protect landscapes of production from nuisance suits. While Right to Farm Laws have protected certain operations from urban expansion, each of the three states of study have continued to experience loss of both farmland and farm operators since their enactment. Additionally, Right to Farm Laws have lessened the effect of existing environmental regulations and have been exploited by industrial-scale agriculture, affecting both smaller-scale farming operations and local communities.65

In addition to zoning, market-based initiatives are used in rural spaces as a planning mechanism. Market-based instruments are financial incentives governments, and NGOs offer rural landowners to encourage desired land-use

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outcomes. Unlike subsidies, these instruments involve landowners accepting restrictions on land use in exchange for financial benefits. Participation is voluntary, and success depends on the number of participants and adequate funding. Conservation easements are commonly deployed in rural areas along with sliding-scale area-based allocation zones.

Conservation easements are market-based incentives that help farmers and landowners protect their land from development by voluntarily placing restrictions on its use in exchange for financial benefits. These easements aim to address challenges such as sustaining farming operations, passing land to future generations, and preventing land sales for development. A conservation easement involves a landowner severing the right to develop the property through a legally binding document. The easement restricts land uses to farming, forestry, natural areas, or open space. Conservation easements can be temporary or perpetual, with most being perpetual to qualify for federal tax benefits. Conservation easements have proven durable. Private land trusts and government agencies have acquired millions of hectares of land through easements, protecting agricultural land, forests, and wetlands. These easements are popular in northeastern states, California, Colorado, and Ohio, and help maintain farming and open spaces.

The advantages of conservation easements include providing landowners with financial benefits without selling their land, supporting retirement planning, and facilitating intergenerational land transfer. They also cost less than outright land purchases, with landowners primarily responsible for property management. Governments can use easements to guide growth, protect the environment, and preserve rural lands. However, there are challenges to acquiring conservation easements. They can be costly, and public and private funds may not always be available. Tax benefits may not be attractive to landowners with low incomes. Scattered protected lands can attract conflicting interests, especially when weak zoning regulations allow adjacent development. In remote rural areas, easements may have limited value due to limited development potential. Additionally, the process of selling a conservation easement can be time-consuming, leading to delays and potential alternative development options. Additionally, these programs only work in communities where land is locally owned, which is not the case in much of the Black Belt. Overall, conservation easements provide a valuable tool for landowners to protect their land and receive financial benefits while preserving agricultural and ecological values. However, addressing funding limitations, ensuring attractive tax incentives, and managing potential conflicts are essential for their effectiveness. Additionally, these programs only


67 Ibid
Timber companies stop replanting after harvest and sell land to developers in Mississippi. County is unable to provide infrastructure to remote region.

Unsustainable municipal growth in Georgia as areas outside of legislative boundaries are developed and then expect to receive city services.

Work in communities where land is locally owned. All three states, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia have conservation easement programs. The limited effectiveness of zoning codes and land use laws to operate in the Black Belt has created stalemates between planners and rural communities. Ms. Debra Jones68, a multicounty regional planner in the region, explained, “When (rural communities) reach out with improvements and things they wanna change, we tell them that we have to start the planning process. We have to create a zoning plan.” When asked what happens if the community does not want to implement zoning, Ms. Jones expressed frustration stating, “There are several communities that don’t want to create a zoning plan, which I totally understand. I mean, our hands are basically tied in these communities anyways because of the state legislation.” She went on to explain that even though multiple counties have zoned for agriculture successfully, their plans are currently not in accordance with state law. “The state legislation was passed through by the Farm Bureau, and I get it; they want to protect agriculture. I totally respect that and understand it. But in some ways, that handicapped us because we can’t help these rural communities. The existing Agricultural Zoning hasn’t been challenged yet.”

Spatial Challenges and Land Use Changes

The lack of design or spatial thinking in the Black Belt has led to several implementation gaps and an inability to meet specific challenges. Debra explained that her multicounty regional authority has limited control over land use changes which are occurring within their jurisdiction. “We are seeing huge areas where the timber companies are not replanting. They have told us that they are selling it off because they can make more money off of the land than the crop. Developers are going in there and eating it up. But these sites are remote, and it’s causing a lot of problems for the county. They are requiring new residents to sign a deed restriction that acknowledges that they are on a private road. The county is even shutting down existing public roads because they can’t keep up the infrastructure.” Mr. Randy Williams69, a multicounty regional planner in another district, expressed similar concerns regarding service provision. “Developers are coming right up to the city limits but staying in the unincorporated areas to build. After they start construction, they go to the city and ask for water and sewer connections. Many of our cities need housing, so they say yeah, sure. They do require them to become incorporated, though. We don’t let them cherry-pick. If they want to connect to the central system, they have to pay for it. But there’s still no negotiation process.” With limited regulatory options available, alternate tools and methods that are spatial and design based have the potential to set a community-wide vision and create physical elements for future development to respond to.

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68 ‘Ms. Debra Jones’ is a pseudonym for a multicounty regional planner in the Black Belt. She is a white female between the age of 31-45 and identifies as living in a rural area.
69 ‘Mr. Randy Williams’ is a pseudonym for a multicounty regional planner in the Black Belt. He is a white male between the age of 45-65 and identifies as living in a non-rural area.
Conclusion and Recommendations

While administrative structures have been put in place to address rural planning and design in the Black Belt, multi-county regional commissions have not been equipped to fully support rural communities. Administrative burdens, limited staff, and state regulations have restricted innovative planning and design efforts, forcing reliance on methods which were developed for urban spaces and are ineffective in rural communities.

Multi-County Commission Recommendations:

• **STATE**: Remove legislative restriction requiring local administration’s use of multi-county commission planners.

• **STATE**: Create capacity and funding for additional planners and designers to be on staff.

• **STATE**: Assemble all multi-county commissions to discuss administrative boundaries, capacity, and distribution of responsibilities.

• **COMMISSIONS**: Foster collaborative relationships with private planning and design firms.

• **COMMISSIONS**: Utilize reduction of planning requirements to approach methodologies in an innovative way.

• **COMMISSIONS**: Conduct equity audit of staff and fund distribution.

• **COMMISSIONS**: Conduct more spatial and project-based planning and design focusing on aspirational vision setting rather than regulation.

• **COMMISSIONS**: Foster connections with Multi-State Regional Boards.
Conclusion and Recommendations

In examining the implementation of design and planning methodologies and tools in the Black Belt Region, it becomes apparent that there are significant gaps and challenges in representing rurality.

The lack of methodological innovation specific to rurality has limited the agency of design and planning in the Black Belt. Across multiple scales of intervention, from the national to the local administrations fail to identify, much less address, challenges specific to rural communities. This leaves bottom-up organizing and design paralyzed in the face of systemic issues that need to be addressed at multiple scales, such as land loss, public service provision, and sustainable economic systems.

National policies require a shift to neo-endogenous models, while regional commissions must prioritize inclusivity and holistic approaches. Limited resources and urban-centric methods have hindered rural planning. To address these challenges, steps include recognizing rural uniqueness, promoting collaboration, investing in capacity-building, developing context-specific tools, reforming administrative structures, and embracing interdisciplinary approaches. These efforts can empower rural communities and foster sustainable change.

To envision rural-centered design and planning mechanisms, several steps need to be taken. While these steps may initially appear mundane, they are essential in fostering meaningful change. These include:

1. Recognizing and addressing the unique challenges and opportunities of rural communities in policy frameworks and planning processes.
   THEORY: Develop place-based theory in rural contexts.
   THEORY: Develop more precise terminology to discuss spatial typologies.

2. Promoting knowledge exchange and collaboration between rural communities to share successful practices and strategies.
   PRACTICE: Host rural specific panels, keynotes, and breakout sessions at Planning and Design conferences.

3. Investing in capacity-building initiatives that empower local residents, organizations, and institutions to actively participate in shaping their rural environments.
   PRACTICE: Support Firms working in rural contexts.

4. Developing context-specific methodologies and tools that embrace the nuances of rurality and allow for effective planning and design interventions.
   PRACTICE: Work to create more aspirational/visionary planning methodologies that are specific to rural contexts.
   PRACTICE: Revisit the International Building Code through a rural lens, knowing it is a default tool used in many rural contexts.

5. Advocating for the reform of administrative structures in practice and academia to better support rural communities and provide adequate resources.
   ACADEMIA: Develop rural focused lectures for introductory history and theory courses and rural design guides for studios, introduction to rural contexts, concepts, and challenges.
   ACADEMIA: Identify and recruit students who are familiar with rural contexts.

6. Encouraging interdisciplinary approaches that bridge the gap between design, planning, and other fields to address complex rural challenges comprehensively.
   ACADEMIA: Build work that focuses on regional scale rurality and envisions rural fabric design in a multi-disciplinary format.

By taking these steps, design and planning disciplines can begin to overcome the limitations and barriers present in the Black Belt Region and work towards more inclusive, sustainable, and contextually sensitive approaches that empower rural communities and shape a brighter future for the region.
environments that are functional, beautiful, and sustainable

environments that are functional, beautiful, and sustainable
CHAPTER 3

Evaluating Mechanisms that define and shape Rurality
Introduction

Though design and planning have had a limited role in shaping rurality in the Black Belt, alternative systems have actively influenced regional restructuring, often with a lack of concern for spatial outcomes. This chapter analyses historic and current systems of goods, people, and governance and their influence in the region.

Recasting Rurality

Energy Regimes and Spatial Restructuring

Throughout history, human interventions in ecological systems have predominantly been driven by human needs and benefits, resulting in the perception of the rural as a source of supply weather through the provision of food, minerals, fuel, or building materials. However, this understanding has undergone several transitions. Huber and McCarthy explore the spatial implications of human interventions in natural systems through the concept of energy regimes. They argue that for most of human history, the ‘horizontal surface-based energy regime’ was dominant, where solar energy captured at the Earth’s surface by plants through photosynthesis was predominantly used as fuel for human and animal labor and for the burning of wood for chemical energy. The large amount of rural space required for the ‘horizontal energy regime’ made land a valuable commodity. Over time, the transition in the conceptualization of land from sustenance to resource has resulted in the rural areas being viewed as spaces for production and exploitation. This shift in perspective is arguably the most influential idea that has shaped rural space, leading to the development of specific landscapes, settlement patterns, social organizations, political structures, and economic systems.

As rural spaces have been reshaped to serve production, rural communities rarely see any value captured from the extraction that takes place within the landscape. One key aspect of this failure is driven by capitalist production, where both ecosystems and rural labor are overexploited, leading to environmental degradation and unsustainable economic systems. Karl Marx’s acclaimed theory of metabolism asserts that the value of labor power is determined by the metabolic processes of human beings and the environment. Capitalism’s extraction of labor from rural areas disrupts these processes, leading to

2. Woods 2011
ecological degradation, such as soil erosion, deforestation, and the depletion of resources. The production of surplus value under capitalism further exacerbates this problem, as natural resources are fully exploited to maximize profits, leading to environmental loss and the exhaustion of ecosystem services. Transitions in more extensive rural spatial restructuring and economic systems are part of a larger global phenomenon that has redefined rurality, of which the Black Belt serves as a prime example.

**History of the Black Belt**

While the Black Belt is often defined by its recent history or the last 300 years, its soil has developed over several millennia and has been cultivated by many nations and peoples. Geologists attribute the Black Belt's original soil composition to the lingering continental shift of the Laurentide Ice Sheet throughout the Cretaceous Period. Remnant of an ancient ocean floor, thick, alkaline chalk deposits created a slowly permeable base on which rich topsoil was able to develop. Archeologists estimate that the first humans entered the region approximately 12,000 years ago when a warming climate created rich biodiversity. Teams of Scientists have gone on to identify multiple periods of human habitation where ecological changes and technological innovation led to the development of categories such as the Paleoindian Period and the Archaic Indian Cultural Period, which were followed by the Early, Middle, and Late Woodland Periods. Beginning around 850 CE, the Mississippian Period began with the development of social and political orders, which formed a vast network. For over 600 years, a civilization referred to by Anthropologists as Moundville developed along the Black Warrior River Basin, out of which the political center arose as an elaborate urban fabric. Structured around a central plaza, several large earthen mounds were constructed, rising over 60 feet in height. The population was supported by agriculture, cultivating the Black Belt soil to produce corn, beans, and squash and utilizing periodic burning to increase its nitrogen levels. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, many of the large population centers, including Moundville (Alabama), Lake George (Louisiana), and Spiro (Oklahoma), had disseminated mainly, creating a decentralized settlement pattern. While our understanding of the end of the

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8 Hudson, Charles M., and Carmen Chaves Tesser. 1994. The Forgotten Centuries: Indians and Europe-
Mississippian Period is limited, seven indigenous nations trace their ancestry to Moundville, including the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, the Chickasaw Nation, the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, the Seminole Tribe of Florida, the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, the Alabama-Quassarte Tribal Town, and the Muscogee Nation.

The modern Indigenous nations of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Muskogee (Creek) developed throughout the Black Belt utilizing sophisticated agricultural practices and sustainable relationships with the natural environment. Cultivating crops such as corn, beans, and squash, which formed the foundation of their diet, they developed "swidden" or slash-and-burn farming, clearing small areas of land by cutting down trees and burning the vegetation to prepare the soil for planting. The Choctaw and Chickasaw nations maintained a deep connection to the land and recognized its significance for sustenance and cultural identity. They possessed extensive knowledge of the local flora and fauna, utilizing medicinal plants and engaging in hunting and fishing to supplement their food sources. Their understanding of the land's ecological systems allowed for sustainable resource management and ensured their communities' survival and prosperity. In addition to their agricultural pursuits, the Choctaw and Chickasaw peoples established an extensive system of roads and trade networks that facilitated communication and commerce. These trails, often utilizing natural pathways and rivers, interconnected various tribal settlements and allowed for the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural practices.

As European powers vied for control over the land, violence erupted, and increasing pressure was placed on indigenous peoples to cede their lands. Under a series of treaties, including the Treaty of Fort Jackson in 1814, The Treaty of Indian Springs in 1825, and the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830, Indigenous nations of the region were coerced into relinquishing their ancestral lands and were forcibly removed to designated territories in present-day Oklahoma in what is now known as the Trail of Tears. The removal and subsequent resettlement of Indigenous nations from the Black Belt disrupted their traditional ways of life and profoundly impacted their cultures and communities.

While Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Muskogee (Creek) nations continue to maintain their distinct identities, languages, and cultural practices, there have been no national efforts to reckon for their forced removal from the Black Belt.

Following the forced migration of Indigenous nations and large-scale land grabs by the United States, the Black Belt was parceled and sold to White settlers who transformed the landscape mainly in service of cotton production. With the rise in land availability, the demand for slave labor rose as well, and a second forced migration occurred through the domestic slave trade. James Madison called slavery "America's original sin," on which American capitalism was founded. It was slavery and cotton production in the Black Belt that opened the flow of capital and commerce that led to U.S. economic dominance worldwide.

Continuously the Black Belt has been transformed to maximize production. Though industries and labor systems have changed, each is embedded in the region's history. In the following section, the continual restructuring of the Black Belt to maximize production will be explored in relation to spatial transitions and the development of systems of support.


The nations are currently advocating for access to the site today, which was restricted due to the privatization of the property.


GOODS: Production and Consumption of Rural Space

Industry as Regional Structure

The Black Belt region was drastically reshaped in service of agricultural extraction through the production of cotton, which has had spatial effects as well as continued impacts on existing social, economic, and political systems.

The cotton industry in the Black Belt region was intricately intertwined with the institution of slavery. Enslaved labor formed the backbone of cotton production, working on large plantations owned by the planter elite. The extensive cultivation of cotton necessitated an enormous labor force, expanding and intensifying slavery in the region. Slavery shaped the economic landscape and permeated social hierarchies, with the planter elite wielding significant power and influence. Racial divisions were deeply ingrained, with systemic discrimination and the dehumanization of enslaved African Americans. The reliance on slave labor in the Black Belt built the national economy and supported global networks of trade, as cotton became a crucial commodity in the international market. The demand for cotton fueled an expansionist economy, leading to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few plantation owners. This concentration of economic power perpetuated social inequalities, hindering economic mobility for non-plantation owners. Moreover, the reliance on a single cash crop left the region vulnerable to market fluctuations and ecological risks. Maintaining inequity to support the cotton industry required considerable political power and intervention, creating structures that still exist within the Black Belt. The planter elite, who amassed substantial wealth through cotton production, wielded considerable political power. They used their influence to shape policy decisions that favored their economic interests. As a result, policies often neglected the needs of non-plantation owners and marginalized communities, deepening social and economic disparities.

Legislation supported the cotton industries directly through subsidies and labor laws as well as through systemic racism, which controlled the majority of the labor force, including Jim Crow laws and voting restrictions.

18 Reidy 1992
19 Womack 2013
20 Reidy 1992
After the Civil War, the plantation economy in the Southern United States persisted through tenant farming and convict leasing. Deeply rooted in the legacy of slavery, these systems ensured the continuation of agricultural production while maintaining racial control and economic exploitation. Tenant farming, also known as sharecropping, emerged as a predominant arrangement, where freed African Americans and impoverished white farmers rented land from large landowners. This system gave the illusion of autonomy, as tenants could choose crops and work independently. However, in reality, it resulted in a cycle of debt and dependence. Landowners manipulated prices and credit terms, forcing tenants into unfavorable contracts that kept them in perpetual poverty. The lack of access to resources and credit constrained tenant farmers’ ability to break free from the plantation model and pursue independent livelihoods.

Convict leasing, another form of exploitative labor further sustained the plantation economy. Southern states enacted laws that criminalized minor offenses, disproportionately targeting African Americans, and subjected them to forced labor as convicts. Under this system, prisoners convicted of crimes were leased from the state, using them as laborers in the cotton industry as well as mining and logging. The harsh conditions and abusive treatment mirrored the brutality of slavery, as convicts were subjected to excessive workloads, inadequate living conditions, and rampant violence. While convict leasing is no longer a legal practice in the Black Belt, it served as a foundation for existing inequities such as mass incarceration.

The continuation of the plantation economy through tenant farming and convict leasing was facilitated by the racial hierarchy ingrained in Black Belt society. African Americans, despite being formally emancipated, faced systemic discrimination and limited opportunities. Racial violence and lynching were deeply intertwined with labor control. These acts of terrorism aimed to enforce racial hierarchy, suppress labor movements and maintain economic exploitation through intimidation and the suppression of Black workers’ rights. These exploitative systems served not only economic interests but also reinforced racial control by maintaining African Americans’ subordination and denying them landownership and economic independence, white landowners and power structures maintained their dominance and preserved racial hierarchies in the post-Civil War South. In the following section, the systems that support the cotton industry are explored in relation to the development of alternative industries.

Beyond Cotton

Due to unsustainable agriculture practices and the boll weevil infestation of the early 1910s, which destroyed billions of pounds of cotton worth nearly a trillion dollars, industry transitions began across the Black Belt. While several industries developed during this time period, oil and timber created the largest land use and property ownership transitions.

The relationship between the cotton and oil industries resulted in a complex interplay of economic diversification, infrastructure development, financial resources, knowledge transfer, and social networks. For many throughout the region, the wealth accumulated by cotton plantation owners and entrepreneurs provided the financial means to invest in other industries, including oil. The profits generated from the cotton trade enabled individuals to diversify their investments, expanding economic activities beyond the cotton sector. This newfound capital was crucial in financing oil exploration, drilling, and production. Additionally, the economic power associated with the cotton industry led to improved infrastructure and government incentives facilitated shifts in production throughout the region.

Similar dynamics drove the transition from cotton to timber as transitions to the oil industry. As timber became a lucrative option for landowners and farmers seeking alternatives, technological advancements, landownership transitions, and government incentives facilitated shifts in production throughout the region. Throughout the early 20th century, mechanized logging equipment, such as chainsaws and tractors, improved efficiency and productivity in timber harvesting. These advancements made timber production more economically viable and attractive to landowners seeking alternative income sources. Yet, investment in machinery required financial means, which previous plantation owners mostly held. Plantation owners who faced substantial financial losses from the infestation and were not able to invest in another industry were forced to sell their land, resulting in large-scale land division changes. The continuation of land use and property ownership changes has led to highly concentrated absentee ownership of timberland in the Black Belt. A recent study has shown that in Alabama alone, 70 percent of the land in the state is utilized for timber harvesting.

23 id.

In addition to the oil and timber industries, manufacturing and additional forms of industrialization were also directly linked to the decline of cotton's dominance. The region’s abundant natural resources, transportation networks, and available labor force made it an attractive location for industrial development beginning in the 1930s and specifically after World War II. The industrialization efforts in the Black Belt had significant social, political, and economic impacts. The push for industrial development involved collaborations between local and state governments, business leaders, and community organizations. These partnerships aimed to attract businesses, secure financial incentives, and promote infrastructure development. The political landscape shifted as industrial interests gained influence and power in shaping regional policies. Additionally, the growth of manufacturing provided new job opportunities and increased the region’s economic productivity. It brought investment, capital flow, and technological advancements to the area.

Yet the process of industrialization in the Black Belt region often exploited a low-educated labor force, perpetuating economic disparities. While industrialization brought job opportunities, the jobs created were often low-skilled and low-wage, leaving workers without significant financial gains. While this exploited the existing Black workforce, it also led to an influx of Latin American migrants into the Black Belt. The profits generated by industries were often funneled out of the region to corporate headquarters or external investors, failing to circulate wealth within the local economy. This lack of financial value retention further contributed to the economic challenges faced by the region, hindering its overall development and exacerbating existing inequalities.

In conclusion, the transition from the cotton industry to other sectors, such as oil, timber, and manufacturing in the Black Belt region, has had profound social, political, and economic effects. The region’s historical trajectory highlights the complexities and legacies of its economic transitions. While diversification away from cotton offered new avenues for development, the exploitation of labor and the interplay between economic and political power perpetuated a cycle of concentrated wealth and limited opportunities for the broader population.

34 Ibid
35 Cobb 1993
36 Womack 2013
38 Cobb 1993
Production as Community Identity

While agricultural production is no longer the most extensive land use or economic driver in the Black Belt, many of its residents still envision production as an essential factor that defines rurality. When standing in a parking lot in Dublin, Georgia, I asked Ms. Charlette Jackson39, if she considered the area to be rural. Giving a slightly offended expression, she stated, “Darling, we are in Laurens County, the biggest agricultural area in the state.” With no need for further explanation, Ms. Jackson told me about her life raising her kids within an agricultural community. “We aren’t farmers, but I always wanted my kids to understand this place. We always taught them to value the land.” When asked what she thinks about the future of Rural America, Ms. Jackson sighed and said, “If we allow all of our farms to disappear, it won’t be good. How will we feed the world?” While the Black Belt has never been responsible for feeding the world, agricultural production is deeply embedded in Ms. Jackson’s imaginary and has shaped her lived experience.

Ms. Sherry James40 works at the high school in Vienna, Georgia, but her family maintains a cattle farm. She explains how this form of production influences the way that she interacts with her community stating, “Yeah, it’s not my full-time job, but we have 32 heads of cattle... Since we have the farm, I do help out the Future Farmers of America (FFA). Even if they don’t want to farm, it’s important that they understand the industry and our history.” 45% of interview participants mentioned a form of production when describing either why the area was rural, what they valued about their community, or why they thought rurality was important in the future of the US.

In conclusion, the historical reliance on agricultural production, particularly in the form of cotton, has left a lasting impact on the perception of rurality and community identity in the Black Belt region. While the region has experienced transitions to other industries such as oil, timber, and manufacturing, many residents still associate agricultural production with their sense of place and value the land as a fundamental part of their heritage. This connection to production is often passed down through generations, with community members actively engaging in activities that promote agricultural knowledge and preserve the region’s history. However, the changing economic landscape and the exploitation of labor in various industries have posed challenges to the sustainability and equitable development of the region. Balancing the preservation of agricultural heritage with the need for diversified and inclusive economic opportunities will be crucial for the future of the Black Belt and its communities.

PEOPLE: Rural Social Systems

While production has played a major role in shaping the Black Belt both spatially and systemically, rural communities have organized to meet their own needs through the exchange of social capital and the creation of social infrastructures. Additionally, many rural residents utilize their individual relationship to land to support their practice of rurality.

Rural Community

The notion of rural community has been synonymous with rural life and has been repeatedly associated with rural space. Rural sociologists have endeavored to distinguish rural society as distinct from urban society based on the social interactions and forms that take place in a stable and structured community.41 German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies proposed the concept of ‘gemeinschaft’ and ‘gesellschaft’ as two alternative forms of social organization, which strongly influenced the body of rural community studies in the 1950s and 1960s. However, early attempts at conceptualizing rural communities fell into either a structural-functional approach or an ethnographic perspective, both of which faced difficulties in attributing distinctive structural formations or ‘authentic’ practices to the concept of ‘community.’ It was only with the cultural turn in the late 1980s and 1990s that interest in the meaning of community was reignited in rural studies, with a new approach that conceptualized ‘community’ as a symbolic and socially constructed idea. However, this approach downplayed the materiality of the community. Liepins proposes a new conceptualization of community that incorporates material and spatial aspects of its construction with cultural meanings and practices through which community is performed and reproduced.44 Liepins defines community as “a social construct about human connection that involves cultural, material, and political dimensions.” His work counters previous conceptions of rurality by proposing that rural communities are dynamic and contested groupings of people rather than static and stable places and are constantly changing due to social and economic restructuring.

Liepins also emphasizes the importance of ‘belonging’ within community creation as a means of building ‘social capital’ that enables communities to act collectively. Yet, the notion of belonging also implies the exclusion of people and practices which are deemed not to “belong.” Exclusion from the community can be predicated based on several determinates, such as whether one lives within a specific ‘territorial place,’ duration of residency within the community.

39 Ms. Charlette Jackson is a pseudonym for an interview participant. She is a white female over the age of 66 and identifies as living in a rural area.

40 Ms. Sherry James is a pseudonym for an interview participant. She is a white female between the age of 41-65 and identifies as living in a rural area.

41 For additional information about the conceptualization of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ within the field of sociology, see chapter 1.


43 Woods 2011

related religious practices, and racist and ethnic discrimination. Ethnic minorities living in rural communities frequently experience marginalization and victimization. While subjected to abuse and violence, social exclusion often occurs through the denial of ethnic identity within ‘rural’ identity.

Social Infrastructure

Over recent years social scientists have refined their conceptualization of social capital, largely building from Pierre Bourdieu’s framing, which originally defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” Bourdieu’s definition emphasizes the importance of social connections and relationships, which can provide access to resources and opportunities that may not be available to those without such connections. Often, social capital is framed as an addition or substitution for a preexisting system or alternative form of capital, while in rural contexts, the exchange of social capital is often the only option outside of self-reliance. Additionally, social capital is often measured empirically through an individual’s voluntary participation in institutional organizations, while rural residents frequently exchange social capital informally. The exchange of rural social capital takes place within a range of social infrastructures, both as organizational systems and physical space.

When interview participants in the Black Belt were asked what they value about their community, 12 people responded with a version of “everybody knows everybody.” Several participants expressed the ways that social capital was exchanged within a relationship based on geography, such as with their neighbors.

Mr. Ronnie Crawford from Dublin, Georgia, has built long-term relationships with the community that lives along her street, stating, “We are surrounded by good people. No one new has moved onto our street in 20 years.” She explains how time and small exchanges have built trust, “Our families are close. We always check in when big things happen, you know, like a new baby or a death in the family. We bring food or something.” As private land frequently dominates rural landscapes and public squares are not a common typology, Cassidy explains that exchanges of social capital frequently occur on front porches. “I basically grew up on our neighbor’s front porch. Ms. Drew taught me how to snap green beans, and we would sing for hours.” Cassidy believes that rural areas play an important role in the future of the U.S., saying, “Honestly, they (rural areas) are important. Not everybody wants to live in the city, and everybody should have a spot. I would have had a different life if I didn’t grow up here.”

In a similar way, Ms. Kayla Leroy has built relationships with her neighbors outside of Selma, Alabama. When asked what she values about her community, Kayla declared proudly, “Southern Hospitality. I grew up outside of Atlanta, and it wasn’t the same there.” Differentiating between her previously ‘suburban’ neighbors and newly chosen ‘rural’ neighbors, she explains how the relationships are different, “Now my neighbors live a lot further away, but I see them more. The school is a bit of a drive, so we made a carpool to take the kids into town.” While not spatially connected to her neighbors, Ms. Leroy has built a social infrastructure to solve a commonly experienced problem.

While in Vienna, Georgia, Mr. Ronnie Crawford pulled directly up to me in his 1996 Ford pickup, rolled down the window, and said, “I heard you were doing interviews...you know, it’s a small town, you can’t hide.” Although Vienna consists of only 2,751 residents, Ronnie considers it separate from its agricultural context expressing, “I live in town right now, but I would prefer to live out in the country. I used to, but I lost the house in the divorce.” When discussing his community, he states, “The people here, they are real nosey, but if you need something, they are always here to help.” He went on to share his experience after a tornado that tore a destructive path through the county in 2007: “It was terrible; there were trees and power lines down everywhere. You couldn’t use most of the roads. But we didn’t wait around for FEMA. It was gonna take them two weeks to get here. Neighbors poured out into people’s yards with chainsaws and cleaned it up.” Mr. Crawford didn’t recount the experience of a national service failure with any disdain or surprise but as a fact. Rural communities are frequently cast as ‘resilient’ when social capital is used to replace public service provision, whether confronting a disaster or creating a carpool group. The formalization of ‘rural resilience’ takes on the burden of rural communities to create a self-contained system devoid of national and global flows of economic capital and power.

Even as the exchange of social capital is frequently sought, some participants are excluded from the system or value the lack of social exchange within their community.

49 ‘Ms. Cassidy James’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. She is a black female between the age of 18-30 and identifies as living in a rural area.
50 ‘Ms. Kayla Leroy’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. She is a black female between the age of 31-45 and identifies as living in a rural area.
51 ‘Mr. Ronnie Crawford’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. He is a white male between the age of 46-65 and identifies as living in a non-rural area.
52 2020 Census
community. While in Dublin, Georgia, Mr. Jeff Adams\textsuperscript{55} overheard the conclusion of an interview I was having with another participant who was explaining the support they received from their community. Jeff intentionally stuck around to clarify, “The stories you have been hearing about people helping each other is all a lie.” He felt isolated within the community and was unhappy with ongoing transitions. “There is only high-class rural around here now. It’s not the same as it was. These people don’t understand my problems.” While Mr. Adams identified as currently living in a rural area, he did not choose to do so and “would move tomorrow.”

10 people interviewed, or 6\% of the participants, mentioned solitude or a lack of social interaction as what they valued about their rural home. Mr. Demarcus Mills\textsuperscript{56} of Shady Groove, Alabama, was one of these participants, stating, “Yeah, I grew up here, and I stayed because everybody minds their own business.” He expressed his gratefulness for a lack of communal spaces stating, “People stay to themselves and only really exchange in passing.” Although Mr. Mills did not seem to hold any value in capital or the infrastructures in which it is exchanged, it took him over 15 minutes to return to his truck after the interview as he stopped to talk with several people along the way. Mr. Mills was not alone in his social journey from the store to his vehicle; over 38\% of the participants spoke to someone in the parking lot when entering or exiting the store.

### Relationships to Land

Of the 178 people interviewed, 14 brought up their relationship to land without being prompted, 11 of whom were white, and 11 were male, aligning with the dominant access to land ownership in the region. Throughout the Black Belt, there are a multiplicity of relationships with land, conceiving of it as a means of production, a source of security, a responsibility to steward, and a commodity that has been withheld.

Historically, the land has served as a source of security for residents of the Black Belt. Industries moving into Mississippi after World War II validated their low-wage offerings with the fact that many rural residents did not need the same income as urban residents since they already had access to food through subsistence farming.\textsuperscript{57} A Mississippi advertisement stated, “With plenty of space, gardens will be found at practically every home, supplementing cash income.”\textsuperscript{58} While individuals’ use of the land was exploited in this instance, subsistence farming and other utilizations of ecosystem services still support rural residents.

\textsuperscript{55} ‘Mr. Jeff Adams’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. He is a white male over the age of 66 and identifies as living in a rural area.

\textsuperscript{56} ‘Mr. Demarcus Mills’ is a pseudonym for an interview participant. He is a black male between the age of 46 – 56 and identifies as living in a rural area.


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid
in the Black Belt today, Mr. Otis Jenkins of Dublin, Georgia, explains, stating, “I plant my food in the ground. I’d say we grow about a third of the vegetables that we eat. We have a couple of chickens. The eggs add a protein.” Mr. Otis says that gardening started out as a hobby for him, but it turned into something more. “You know it’s been nice to have during all of these food shortages and with inflation.” Additionally, he has started collecting his own solar energy. “We installed solar panels a few years ago. I don’t trust the power company. They just kept raising our rates, and I thought well, fine, we can get our own electricity.”

When asked about the future of Rural America, Mr. Otis said, “If things don’t change, life will be very difficult for people.”

While some residents are able to utilize the ecosystem services around them, some experience barriers to access. Ms. Rashanda Shepard helps feed her family by fishing outside of Vienna, Georgia. “The fishing is really good around here. We do some of the cleaning ourselves, but if we catch a lot, we take them to the processor and freeze, um. We can eat on them for a good while.” Ms. Shepard is from the Black Belt and values the relationship she is able to have with natural systems. “The air is just so nice out here. I just breathe it straight into my soul.”

While some residents are able to utilize the ecosystem services around them, many are unable to use their land for production due to the proximity to toxic waste dumping and the spraying of chemicals for industrial agriculture.62

In addition to rural residents viewing land as sustenance, several Black Belt landowners view land as a responsibility towards stewardship and generational wealth. Mr. James Wilson imagines himself as the temporary owner of the land that was once his family’s. “My father passed it on to me, and I will pass it on to my daughter. It is a choice, but not one I really made.” When asked about the future role of rurality at a national level, James paused to consider the question, “We have family land. My father passed it on to me, and I will pass it on to my daughter. It is a choice, but not one I really made.”

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for every individual based on race, personal views, and their use of ecosystem services. This analysis emphasizes how rurality in the Black Belt is both a means of support and often an active choice.

**GOVERNANCE: Structures**

Governance structures in the Black Belt largely exist to support methods of production and maintain social and economic power over the labor force. The structural focus on ‘productivity’ and extraction has led to a failure of provision for rural communities throughout the region. As a result, local residents have been forced to become active citizens through the creation of isolated systems that operate outside of larger exchanges of economic and political power.

**Government or Governance?**

In the late 1990s, the shift from government to governance became a subject of academic debate, particularly in rural contexts. The focus was on the role of governance in endogenous models of development, emphasizing bottom-up approaches and local resources. The ongoing changes in rural governance reflect the withdrawal of the state from public tasks due to financial crises and state reforms. Some present the lack of public funds presents itself as an opportunity for citizen empowerment, yet similar opportunities were not afforded to rural citizens in the Black Belt. Marginal rural areas are particularly affected, relying on active citizens to maintain vital services. These areas serve as contexts for understanding multilevel governance where the closure of essential services in rural areas has led to community groups taking matters into their own hands.

**Rural Citizenship and Failing Infrastructure**

The notion of ‘citizenship’ remains a perpetually contested concept; nonetheless, it is frequently employed to denote an individual’s affiliation with a political entity and their wider engagement within the broader fabric of society. The relationship between the citizen and the nation-state can be framed as an exchange of ‘rights’ and ‘duties,’ wherein the citizen is entitled to certain rights and services from the state and is expected to perform corresponding duties in return, such as paying taxes, obeying the law, and contributing to the

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71 See chapter two.

For several decades Catherine Flowers has worked with the rural residents in Lowndes, finding that 90% of county households have failing or inadequate wastewater systems. Flowers explains how local infrastructure provision has created a structural poverty trap through a local resident’s experience. Purchasing a trailer home in 1995 for $113,000, the owner, Ms. Pam,\(^\text{77}\), still owed $13,000 24 years later. Struggling to make payments on less than $1,000 monthly income, sustaining her own septic system, which is mandated by the Health Department, is not financially feasible as the systems typically cost more than $15,000 to install with the additional requirement of a percolation test which costs an additional $20,000. With no other alternative, Pam had to resort to a straight pipe system, in which the sewage is dispersed at surface level and flows throughout her yard. As the majority of residents have had to utilize straight piping, a health crisis has developed, which led to the resurgence of hookworm, a parasite that was thought to have been eradicated in the US decades ago.

The Alabama Department of Public Health regulates the installation, use, and maintenance of septic systems in the state, and their guidelines require each home to have its own septic system. Any alternative system is subject to approval by the state and is rarely granted. In December of 2021, a year after Flowers’s book was published, CBS News picked up the story, among others, and began discussing rural institute failure at a national scale. Within their ‘60 minutes’ segment, they attempted to understand who is responsible for the existing public health crisis. Lowndes County officials stated they did not have the funds to address the problem, and the state declined to comment. A member of the Department of Public Health, Sherry Bradley, stated that the Department is not responsible, but she has been personally active, seeking outside grants and donations for septic tank systems. Ms. Bradley’s statement that the state isn’t responsible but taking on the problem herself leads to an understanding of the responsibility that is placed on rural residents and the burden of its acceptance. Frequently rural communities are perceived as both the cause and the solution of rural problems with important implications for citizenship.\(^\text{81}\)

The welfare of the community: Tim Cresswell argues that access to services forms a ‘prosthetic’ that enables full participation in society, which is complicated in rural contexts when governments withdraw or fail to provide certain services and infrastructure, resulting in partial citizenship where rural residents are unable to access rights available to other segments of society, yet are still expected to perform their ‘duties’. In response, many rural communities resort to a form of ‘active citizenship’ through the creation of alternative service provision in sectors such as housing, policing, and health care.\(^\text{73}\) Often Design and Planning practice deploy default infrastructures, which were conceived in urban space as centrally networked and heavily engineered systems, in rural areas, inadvertently contributing to the partial citizenship of rural communities. In Lowndes County, Alabama, the same soil whose water retention keeps cotton roots well-hydrated contributes to a lack of waste percolation and the accumulation of sewage in the yards of Black Belt residents.


\(^\text{74}\) Ibid.


\(^\text{79}\) ‘Ms. Pam’ is a pseudonym for a resident of Lowndes County that Catherine Coleman Flowers gives to an interview participant in her book, W ona’s Fight Against America’s Dirty Secret.


While the state has failed to provide adequate services to the citizens of Lowndes County, there has been no reduction in regulation. In addition to dictating the type of system and who can use it, the state also maintains power by requiring installers to be licensed by the state and by holding residents who resort to straight piping legally responsible for not complying with state regulations. There are several potential motivations for Alabama's legislation requiring a single system per household. One potential reason is to enforce the singular family unit to bear the burden, to discourage formal community organizing. Another is that the existing system does not present a problem for the citizenry with political power. In 2015, a civil rights complaint was filed with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Yet the investigation did not begin until January 2022, one month after the story broke on national news.

The suppression of rights in Lowndes County is not a recent occurrence, nor is it limited to infrastructure provision. In his work “Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt,” Hasan Kwame Jeffries contends that the history of rights suppression in the county is intricately tied to the political and social dynamics of rural citizenship. Jeffries explains that White elites in the county used a variety of tactics, such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and violent intimidation, to systematically suppress the voting rights of Black citizens. This voter suppression was a part of a broader system of racial oppression that denied African Americans access to political power, economic opportunity, and basic human rights. Jeffries argues that the Black Power movement in Lowndes County, led by groups like the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), through a combination of grassroots organizing, strategic alliances, and direct action, African American residents of Lowndes were able to form a new political coalition and achieve important victories in the struggle for civil rights and political power.

Repeatedly rural citizens in the Black Belt have had an unequal exchange with the state as their rights were suppressed through access to services and the ability to vote. As a result, solutions were only available outside of the dominant system. What does the creation of multiple scales of citizenship mean for rurality as a whole?

Challenges in providing rural infrastructure are not unique to Lowndes County, as approximately 20% of the U.S. population relies on onsite wastewater management systems, with up to half of those systems failing to operate effectively since 65% of the country’s land area is unable to support percolation-based septic tank systems. Yet legislation and the market fail to support alternative systems that are specific to the needs of rural communities. In turn, rural residents must rely on community organizations or non-governmental actors to supply services typically provided by the state in the form of formally organized groups composed of local citizens. There is ongoing debate as to what scale this should occur, with multiple forms of co-production between policymakers, the state, and citizen lead groups. Yet, some communities have gone to the extreme of fully taking over service provision in return for a portion of the budget that was intended for those services, offering them the opportunity to redesign and reorganize distribution based on local needs. While this method has been effective and could serve as a potential precedent for Lowndes County, there are still concerns surrounding the ‘outsourcing’ of governance. Nathan Young argues that senior governments ‘offload’ service provision to local communities to absolve themselves of rural livelihoods and environments, transferring the responsibility for any failures that may occur to the citizens themselves. Lowndes County serves as an example of the work that needs to be done to understand citizenship in relation to infrastructure provision and the agency of design and planning in rethinking multiple scales of rural governance.

In conclusion, governance structures in the Black Belt have perpetuated the marginalization of rural communities by prioritizing productivity and neglecting their basic needs. The withdrawal of the state from public tasks and the failure to provide essential services have resulted in partial citizenship for rural residents, who are expected to fulfill their duties without access to corresponding rights. In response, active citizenship has emerged as a means for rural communities to address their own needs. However, this reliance on alternative service provision highlights the systemic failure of infrastructure and governance.

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Larger economic, development, and labor systems in the Black Belt consistently extract from ecological systems and rural citizens failing to provide adequate support in return.
Conclusion

In examining the systems of goods, governance, and people in the development of the Black Belt and their ongoing influence, it becomes evident that these interconnected elements play a crucial role in shaping the region. Each system has contributed to the social, economic, and political landscape of the Black Belt, leaving lasting legacies and presenting challenges for design and planning in rural contexts.

The transition from the cotton industry to other sectors, such as oil, timber, and manufacturing, brought about significant transformations in the region. While diversification offered new opportunities, it also perpetuated patterns of concentrated wealth and limited prospects for the broader population. This highlights the intricate relationship between economic transitions and their social and political consequences, underscoring the need for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between goods, governance, and people in rural development. Furthermore, the residents of the Black Belt have demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness by utilizing social capital and infrastructure to address systemic deficiencies and create unique social structures. Rurality, as both a means of support and a deliberate choice, plays a central role in shaping the lives of individuals in the region. However, the diverse relationships to land, influenced by factors such as race, personal views, and the utilization of ecosystem services, reveal the complexity of rural experiences and the need for nuanced approaches in design and planning. Governance structures in the Black Belt have contributed to the marginalization of rural communities by prioritizing productivity over basic needs. The withdrawal of the state from essential services and the resulting partial citizenship experienced by rural residents underscore the systemic failures in infrastructure and governance. In response, active citizenship has emerged as a means for rural communities to address their own needs, emphasizing the importance of community agency and grassroots initiatives in rural development.

Given the inextricable interconnectedness of goods, governance, and people in the Black Belt, it is imperative that design and planning disciplines thoroughly consider each of these elements when engaging in rural contexts. By acknowledging and understanding the dynamics between these systems, practitioners can develop more holistic and contextually sensitive approaches that address the specific challenges and opportunities present in the region. This requires collaborative efforts, interdisciplinary perspectives, and a commitment to social and environmental equity, ultimately shaping a more inclusive and sustainable future for the Black Belt and beyond.
CONCLUSION

Design and Planning Discipline
Call to Action
Conclusion

This Thesis has explored the various ways in which design and planning have failed rurality and the Black Belt region of the Southern United States. The work has complicated existing understandings of rurality and challenged the discipline in several ways. First, the work has categorized the vast field of urban and rural relational theory into five categories and shown how they do not fully encompass the Black Belt or rural realities, resulting in a lack of tools and methodologies which are specifically designed to address rural challenges. Second, the analysis has shown how “traditional” or urban-centric design and planning practice has consistently been ineffective in the Black Belt and identified several next steps in addressing rurality as a discipline. Finally, this work has begun to understand how systems of goods, people, and governance shape both spatial and lived realities in the Black Belt and the agency of design and planning to act within them. It has been my contention that by failing to interrogate spatial frameworks within multiple forms of human habitation due to hyper fixation on urbanism, the discipline has neglected potential solutions towards environmental and social justice.

Given that rurality and the Black Belt have been subjected to limited levels of critical scholarly attention, this thesis cannot claim to be comprehensive in any manner. Nor do any of the conclusions drawn claim to represent rurality as a whole. Rather, the goal of this work has been to validate and open the conversation toward future rural study and ultimately serve as a call to action for the design and planning disciplines.
Call to Action
As we stand at a critical juncture in human history, where the urgency to address ecological loss, social inequity, and community displacement has never been greater, it is imperative that the planning and design disciplines expand their field of vision to include the rural landscape. While urban solutions have dominated our efforts thus far, it is now evident that a comprehensive approach encompassing multiple forms of human habitation is necessary to achieve true social and environmental equity.

Rurality, long overlooked and marginalized within the design and planning discourse, demands our attention. It is not merely a peripheral space but rather a complex system interwoven with social, political, and economic dynamics that shape the lives of millions. By failing to acknowledge the influence design and planning knowingly or unknowingly exert in rural spaces, we perpetuate a cycle of neglect and perpetuate the disparities faced by rural communities.

We must recognize that rurality is not a monolithic entity but a diverse tapestry of landscapes, cultures, and histories. It is in this diversity that lies the potential for innovative solutions, community resilience, and sustainable practices. By engaging with rurality as an essential component of our collective future, we can tap into the wealth of knowledge and traditions that have sustained rural communities for generations.

To achieve this, we need a fundamental reevaluation of our methodologies, tools, and theories. We must actively challenge the urban-centric bias that has limited our understanding of rurality and hindered our ability to address its unique challenges. We need to develop a rural spatial theory that goes beyond generalizations and stereotypes and instead captures the intricacies and complexities of rural spaces.

Moreover, we must foster partnerships and collaboration between urban and rural communities, recognizing the interconnectedness of our landscapes and the shared responsibility we bear towards one another. It is through dialogue, empathy, and mutual respect that we can co-create inclusive, sustainable, and just futures.

In conclusion, as stewards of the built environment, the planning and design disciplines have a profound role to play in shaping our collective future. By embracing rurality as an essential component of our work, we can forge a path toward social and environmental equity. Let us seize this opportunity to reorient our relationship with rurality, expand our perspectives, and together, build a more just and sustainable world for all.
Utilizing the elements which were used to identify the Black Belt, an undetermined number of rural regions are also identifiable in the U.S. Four possible regions are shown here.
### Methodology to Produce Rural Theory

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<td>natural and engineered</td>
<td>Industry interviews</td>
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<td>PEOPLE</td>
<td>social institutions</td>
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### Analysis to Produce Rural Black Belt Theory

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Proposed work toward a more robust rural theory.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to the individuals and groups who have contributed to the realization of this work:

First and foremost, I am deeply thankful to the residents of the Black Belt who generously shared their stories and experiences, making this research possible. Your willingness to stimulate meaningful conversations has been invaluable in shaping the insights and perspectives presented in this thesis. I am truly grateful for your contributions, which have added depth and authenticity to this work.

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To my friends and family, I extend heartfelt appreciation for their continuous support and encouragement. Their presence and influence in my life have shaped my understanding of rural spaces and inspired me to delve deeper into these important questions. Their unwavering belief in my ambitions has been a constant source of motivation, and I am truly grateful for their love and encouragement.

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Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to my friends and colleagues who have been part of Rural GSD. Our shared reflections and discussions on the definition of rurality in academic and personal contexts have been enlightening and thought-provoking. I am excited about our shared commitment to advancing this work and making a meaningful impact in the field.

To all those who have contributed to this research, whether directly or indirectly, your involvement and support have been invaluable. This thesis is a testament to our collective dedication to understanding and addressing the challenges and opportunities of rural spaces. Thank you for being integral to this journey, and I am deeply appreciative of your contributions.
"I try not to go into the city. My daughter lives in Montgomery and it’s just a completely different place. I don’t like the way it feels there."

"I love living in the county, but we just need more. The future is geared to urban cities, technology doesn’t reach out here. There’s bad cell service... there are lots of things to improve, but those things aren’t up to us."

female | black | age (over 60)

"...only people with money live in the country. The millionaires out there own a lot of land, and that will get you somewhere."

male | black | age (18-30)

"I love living here. I need to be close to nature. It’s a good place for families... and I can see a future for me here."

male | black | age (18-30)

"The schools really aren’t great here. The private school is expensive, and the public school doesn’t get enough resources."

"I sold my house in the city. It was just too expensive... it’s more affordable out here. The house was cheaper. The taxes are lower. I grew a lot of food in my garden and that helps some."

female | black | age (51-60)
73% of rural residents said that they are dependent on social capital and social infrastructure.

44% used language such as “out here” or “out there” when describing rural geographies.

“People here, they are real noisy, but if you need something, they are always here to help.”

“The tornado was terrible; there were trees and power lines down everywhere. You couldn’t use most of the roads. But we didn’t wait around for FEMA. It was going to take them two weeks to get here. Neighbors poured out into people’s yards with chainsaws and cleaned it up.”

“We are surrounded by good people. No one new has moved onto our street in 20 years... We always check in when big things happen, you know, like a new baby or a death in the family. We bring food or something.”

“I live living out here... The county water is a lot better than the city water.”
METHODOLOGICAL DIAGRAM:
Ethnographic Interviews
diagram served as a foundation on
which to trace individual interviews
and understand each in relation to the
greater whole.

“I plant my food in the ground. I’d
say we grow about a third of the veg-
ctables that we eat. We have a couple
of chickens.”

“We installed solar panels a few
years ago. I don’t trust the power
company. They just keep raising our
rates, and I thought well, fine, we can
get our own electricity.”

male | black | age (36-45)
METHODOLOGICAL DIAGRAM:
Regional Transitions

Diagram served as a mapping exercise in which to understand spatial transitions caused by systems of goods, people, and governance.
CITATIONS


“Political Economy Approaches and a Changing Rural Ge...”


Cobb, James C. 1993. The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial


Georgia Planning Act (O.C.G.A. 45-12-200, et seq., and 50-81, et seq.)


no. 37: 57–148.


Mississippi Code Title 57 – Planning, Research, and Development Chapter 1 - Mississippi Development Authority.


Newcastle: Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle.


President Theodore Roosevelt supported the Country Life movement as he saw rural values as “what is fundamentally best and most needed in our American Life.” Roosevelt’s perspective and creation of national policy serves as an example of political shaping of the American Rural further discussed in Chapter 3.


Williams, Raymond. 1973. The Country and the City. New York: Oxford University Press. Williams argues that the rural has been historically developed as a site of extraction but critiques this framing, calling for a rethinking of the countryside which recognizes the cultural and social value of rural life and communities. Additionally, while explaining this divergence, Williams argues that rural and urban are inextricably linked. His work is discussed further in the next section, “Exchange.”

Wirth, Louis. 1956. Urbanism as a Way of Life. Wirth argues that rural life in the United States has been the main focus of government bureaus referencing the report, Country Life Commission, in 1909 and calling for an acceleration of urban study to the same caliber.


