Imperfectly Imperial: Northern Travel Writers in the Postbellum U.S. South, 1865–1880

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Travel accounts of the Reconstruction U.S. South (1865–1880) played a formative role in the process of determining where the region fit within the nation-state after the Civil War. Postbellum travel narratives by northern men and women, in particular, dealt with the South’s contradictory placement as both an occupied territory of the North/nation and part of the national body itself through a discourse of imperialism that translated a North-South regional binary into a colonizer-colonized distinction and framed the South as an imperial holding of the U.S. This article uses postcolonial studies and postcolonial geographies to North America to examine three textual themes that sustained this imperial framing of the South within northern travel narratives: discourses of civilization, descriptions of nature, and discussions of whiteness. The first two themes bolstered northern travelers’ positioning of the South as an imperial holding, although gender contoured how northern travelers participated in a civilizing mission directed toward newly emancipated African Americans and how easily these travelers assumed the role of imperial explorer in rural and marginal southern sites. By contrast, white rural poverty in the postbellum South, through its simultaneous racial similarity to and class difference from white northern travelers, problematized a clean separation of North from South and highlighted the imperfections and contradictions of the postbellum South as an imperial holding of the North/nation. This article argues for more critical attention to the production of southern difference in the mid-nineteenth century and the postbellum South’s place in relation to future American imperial projects. Key Words: travel writing, whiteness, gender, American South, postcolonial studies.

While I cannot agree . . . that the people of the North and South were two distinct nations . . ., I still recognize essential differences between the inhabitants of the Northern and Southern States. These differences are not merely climatic; they were inbred by the system and tendencies which have been so lately done away with. Between the citizen of Massachusetts and the dweller in South Carolina a broad and deep gulf so long existed, that it is not strange that the habits, the customs, and the language of the people should differ in many particulars.

—(E. S. King 1875, 771)

(N) o one can be a student of the region without also being aware that differences between North and South are among the staples of our work.

—(Degler 1987, 3)

Discussions of the U.S. South are almost always discussions of difference. As a region, the South has consistently been envisioned as different from, and different within, the nation-state (Woodward 1968, 1971; Grantham 1994/2001; Greeson 1999) and has received more intense analysis and interpretation than any other part of the country (Hobson 1983; Griffin 1995). Those differences that have come to define the South are typically presented as if they map evenly across a region that is homogeneously distinct from the North or nation. In the process, the means by which scholars and laypersons alike have come to recognize a South different from a North/nation are buried deep within a scramble for the roots and characteristics of southern distinctiveness. This sense of the South as different or distinctive can be seen in the two passages that begin this article, the first from a popular postbellum travel writer of the 1870s and 1880s, and the second from a well-known southern historian of the 1970s and 1980s. Although these writings span more than one hundred years and cross the lines between sojourner and scholar, between an immediate reaction to a devastating war and a career devoted to thinking about that war and its repercussions, both are informed by an ontological separation of a U.S. South from a U.S. North.

The 1860s and 1870s were a time of particularly intense interest in southern distinctiveness as a way to frame the South’s ambiguous relation to the nation-state in the aftermath of the Civil War (1861–1865), and this article examines the processes by which a discourse of southern distinctiveness was created and sustained in a postwar context. Through an analysis of postbellum travel accounts penned by northern men and women, it argues that the postwar South occupied a double place within the U.S. as both an occupied territory (re)cap-
tured through war and a part of the victorious nation itself. After the Civil War, northern travelers—along with northern politicians, writers, military personnel, and laypeople—envisioned the South as what D. W. Meinig (1998, 189) calls “a new imperial holding.” This understanding of the postbellum South as a “colonial appendage” (Grantham 1994/2001, xvi) raises a new set of questions about the South, imperialism, and national identity and offers new ways of approaching a North-South regional binary in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. A critical examination of the South’s position as a post-Civil-War imperial holding can illustrate how in an immediate postbellum context, a regional binary acted as an internal colonizer-colonized distinction that became an organizing grammar for both the nation’s reaction to southern defeat and the relationship between a victorious North and a defeated South.

Just as postcolonial studies have helped to extricate, and in some cases challenge, key aspects of colonial and imperial relationships across the globe, the theoretical contributions of postcolonial studies can also be deployed to examine the postbellum South’s relations to the North/nation as the country emerged from four years of a bloody civil war. As the growing literature on postcolonial geographies of North America effectively shows, postcolonial studies and theory, through attention to the production and maneuvers of power and difference, can generate more critical understandings of both historical and contemporary relations and practices across North America. Here, I make a similar argument in relation to the mid-nineteenth-century South and, in doing so, bring a different segment of American history and a different part of the nation into a dialogue concerning North American histories and geographies and postcolonial studies.

I make this argument in two parts. The first outlines the theoretical and historical contexts of the postwar travel accounts under examination in this article. It discusses the ways the South has been studied as a region and an idea and connects these approaches to the burgeoning field of postcolonial studies, establishing the region’s double placement as both “insider” and “outsider” within the nation immediately after the Civil War. The second section presents a series of northern travel accounts and three textual themes that illustrate how northern travelers scripted the postbellum South in their travel narratives as an (always imperfect) imperial holding: discourses of civilization, descriptions of nature, and discussions of whiteness. The article concludes with broader arguments about how discussions of the postbellum South can be approached more productively from a perspective informed by postcolonial theory and the possibilities that arise from this approach.

**Situating the South**

Those who write about the South … begin with the knowledge that they will not, and probably should not, have the last word in the telling of its story.

—(Moore and Tripp 1989, xv)

**Historical Analyses of the South**

Although little consensus exists on what the South is or what it constitutes as an object of analysis, the idea that the South is different both from and within the nation-state has provided a powerful construct across southern history and studies. Considered by many scholars to be “the most distinctive region in the nation” (Woodward 1968; Degler 1987, 5; Grantham 1994/2001), the South has stood as the “other” defined in opposition to the North/nation (Woodward 1971; Kooner 1988; Radford 1992; Carlton 1995; Cobb 2000). Although scholars have shifted from straightforward reiterations of southern distinctiveness to analyses of “how race, class, gender, etc. [have] shaped individual and group identities in the South” (Cobb 2000, 23), the final prepositional phrase in this clause, “in the South,” remains. That the South is something or somewhere in which identities can be shaped and which itself can impact national history is assumed, leaving the region’s epistemological status unexamined. Whether writers pen southern encomiums or expositions, the region retains an ontological security grounded in its history and demarcated by the Mason-Dixon line.

In some ways, this critique overlooks the lengths to which people have gone to answer the question, “What is the South?” Richard Gray (1986), for example, suggests that individuals who have written of the region have actually written the region itself, as their words and thoughts, particularly through publication, have affected both conceptualizations of the South and material approaches to it through national policy and economic investment. Gray’s argument foregrounds the processes by which the South has been produced, rather than the different forms that production has taken; this shift is fundamental to deconstructing “the South.” Some historians have chipped away at the idea of a monolithic white South by highlighting southern syncretisms of European and African traditions (Pierson 1989; Joyner 1996) and differences among white southerners (Inscoe 1995). Other scholars have traced changing attitudes toward the South to destabilize ideas about a transcendent southern image (Hobson 1985; Gray 1986, 1999). Feminist scholars of the region have challenged
the South's historiography itself, critiquing approaches that privilege conservative, white, male writers and reproduce a narrow canon in southern history/studies (Hall 1998; Donaldson 1999; A. G. Jones 1999).

Although these studies have shown differences within the region and its transformations over time, they do not query the category of the South itself or the mechanisms through which it has been produced as distinctive in the first place, a position toward which a handful of studies have moved. David Carlton (1995, 33) outlines the "leaps of faith regarding the existence of 'one South'" necessary to talk about the region. Gray (1986, xi), too, queries the region's ontological status, asking, "Is there such a thing as the South, a coherent region and an identifiable culture that can be sharply differentiated from the rest of the U.S.?'" Edward Ayers (1996, 63), in his discussion of the South's oppositional positioning, suggests that for the region to act as "a vast saucer of unpleasant associations," a continual process of recreation and reinforcement is needed to sustain southern difference (Griffin 1995). Ayers conceptualizes the South as a process rather than a place, since, he notes, the region's "place" has never been fixed in relation to intranational boundaries or national imaginaries. Although Ayers's claim overlooks theorizations of place as process (see Pred 1984; Massey 1994), his call for conceptualizing the South's identity and status as unstable is particularly apropos of the region immediately after the Civil War, when many aspects of the South's identity were in flux and debates over its place in relation to the nation state raged. The postwar South's double placement as a conquered territory of the North/nation and a part of that nation made the region's relationship to the U.S. itself difficult to determine—a paradoxical location that resonates with postcolonial studies as a body of work formed in response to colonial relationships in other parts of the world.

Postcolonial Studies and Postcolonial Geographies of North America

Postcolonial studies have had powerful impacts across the social sciences and humanities, even if "the postcolonial has not lent itself to a consensual definition" (Slater 1998, 652; Sidaway 2000). "The postcolonial" can signify both the time period and social conditions following decolonization (Spivak 1995) and a theoretical concept linked to postmodern and poststructural theory and issues of representation and knowledge production (Rattansi 1997; Slater 1998; Venn 1999; Sidaway 2000; Singh and Schmidt 2000). Across these definitions, ideas about "the postcolonial" coalesce around questions of power and subjectivity (Pieterse and Parekh 1995; Jacobs 1996; Loomba 1998) and critical attention to "the mutually constitutive role played by colonizer and colonized, centre and periphery... in forming... the identities of both the dominant power and the subalterns" (Memmi 1967/1991; Rattansi 1997, 481; Slater 1998).

Postcolonial studies center on the production of difference through a colonizer-colonized binary (Slater 1995; Stoler and Cooper 1997; Loomba 1998), whose always ambivalent construction marks the failure of complete colonial authority and enables moments of resistance (Bhabha 1986, 1990).

Within postcolonial studies, Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) has been a foundational text (Rattansi 1997; Loomba 1998). Said (1978, 2–3) argued that Orientalism comprises three interconnected facets: a "European material civilization and culture"; "a style of thought," based in an ontologically separate Orient and Occident; and a "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient." This tri-part structure of Orientalism, he suggested, enables analysis of "the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively" (ibid., 4) and the mechanisms through which Orientalism as discourse and practice gained power over time and across space.4 Said's focus on the Orient's integration into European material culture, the ontological separation of the two regions, and the institutionalization of Orientalist studies are useful for my own analysis of the production of lines of influence and separation between the U.S. North and South (Jansson 2003).5 If imperialism was "not something that happened elsewhere" (McClintock 1995, 5) from Europe, it was also not something that emanated solely from Europe (Kaplan 1993b; Kaplan and Pease 1993), as it was actively enacted within the borders of the American nation-state as well. The postwar South, losing the foundation of its social relations through slavery's abolition and its structure of governance through the Confederacy's collapse (Hahn 1997), became a space that allowed the nation to work out the details of how to manage an occupied territory and facilitated the transition between eighteenth-century nation-building efforts and nineteenth-and twentieth-century empire-building projects in the U.S. (Kaplan 1993a; Domosh 2002).

Although postcolonial theory can enhance an analysis of the links between northern approaches to the postbellum South and broader nineteenth-century western imperialism, it is not without problems. In the post-war South, the line of difference between colonizer and
colonized, between North and South, traced the mid-line of the national body both spatially and socially. This imperial relationship within the social, spatial, and political borders of the U.S. makes the discourses of imperialism and colonialism that I discuss in relation to these postbellum travel accounts both of a piece and at odds with broader analyses of nineteeth-century imperialism. This simultaneous match and mismatch is being examined in the growing body of work on post-colonial geographies of North America. As scholars reconsider the historic division between studies of imperialism and colonialism and historical geographies of North America (Morin 2002a), the complexities of this maneuver become increasingly clear (Sharpe 1995; Slater 1999; C. R. King 2000; Sidaway 2000; Singh and Schmidt 2000; Braun 2002). The foundations of American imperialism have been difficult to trace in part because of the nation's efforts to "contrast its destiny with that of other colonial empires" (J. C. Rowe 2000; Singh and Schmidt 2000, 5; Anderson and Domosh 2002). Through recourse to American exceptionalism, the connections between U.S. domestic and international activities and western imperialism have received limited attention (Morin and Berg 1999; Morin 2002a, b). Recent work in historical geography, however, has attempted "to strategically deflect some of postcolonialism's attention onto American soil" (Morin 2002a, 168) and to address the refusal of empire in North America (Anderson and Domosh 2002). This approach, especially in relation to Native American historical geographies in the U.S. and Canada (Anderson and Domosh 2002; Braun 2002; Morin 2002b; Olund 2002), is all the more important, since the colonial occupation of indigenous lands across North America has constituted "blind spots in public culture" (Anderson and Domosh 2002, 125), which have allowed these countries' roles as "colonizers within their own geopolitical boundaries" (126) to be ignored. As Bruce Braun (2002, 203) notes, however, "the significance of colonialism, and the experience of postcoloniality across the Americas, is highly differentiated," and this point cannot be overlooked in bringing the insights of postcolonial scholarship to the U.S. South. The postbellum South's treatment as a mid-nineteenth-century imperial holding was markedly different from the treatment of Native American peoples and lands. The region, thus, demands an approach that not only engages its production as an imperial space (Clayton 2000) but also addresses the political differences between its occupation and that of native lands and peoples across North America.

Jennifer Greason (1999, 210), in one of the few studies that examines southern history through the lens of postcolonial theory, argues that a postcolonial approach can draw out the "intra-national, regionally inflected symbolic geography, in which the terms 'South' and 'U.S.' formed an ideological juxtaposition" (see also Kolodny 1975). Through an analysis of Crevecoeur's Letters from an American Farmer (1782), she shows how the "totalized figure of 'the South'" came to be known by its "residual coloniality" (Greeson 1999, 290), which allowed the nation itself to shift from British colony to independent nation (J. C. Rowe 2000). Greason (1999, 215) maintains that Crevecoeur and other eighteenth-century writers set the South as "a baseline of universal human evil," a construct that enabled the nation to "progress" while gauging the development of that progress. This positioning of the South, however, was always problematic, as "it located a primary term of oppositional self-definition within the real political borders of the nation" (ibid., 230). Despite efforts to "quarantine coloniality in the figure of the south," "the colonial past of the nation always threatened to return through the portal of the south" (ibid., 238).

**Critical Engagements with Nineteenth-Century Travel Narratives**

The threat of the return of the colonial through the South also haunted the 1860s and 1870s. As northern travel writers and journalists ventured through the postbellum South, their attempts to place the region somewhere within a national body were always fraught with difficulties. Despite these challenges (or perhaps because of them), post-Civil-War travel accounts formed an important aspect of the South's construction as both a place and an object of knowledge in the mid-nineteenth century and affected national policy and opinion in key ways in that time period (Harris 1967; Meinig 1998). In some cases, the travelers who penned these narratives were "special correspondents employed by leading Northern journals to satisfy the public demand for news of the recently vanquished Confederacy" (Harris 1967, 2). Their serialized accounts reached large audiences in major northeastern newspapers and periodicals and formed an important means through which northern readers learned of the South, its landscapes, and its peoples.

Postbellum travel narratives can be situated more broadly in the context of nineteenth-century travel writing, a genre that has received critical attention in recent years (Blunt and Rose 1994b; Robertson et al. 1994; Gregory 1995; Rojek and Urry 1997; Duncan and Gregory 1999b). Nineteenth-century best-sellers (Metcalf 1979), travel narratives allowed vicarious travel to
places to which personal travel might not have been possible; and many studies have examined their textual representations of places and peoples from a variety of perspectives (see, for example, Adler 1989; Behdad 1994; Monicat 1994; Shuffelton 1994; Philips 1999). Works such as Mary Louise Pratt’s examination of travel writing and transculturation (1992) have kept in tandem and tension the ways that travel writing relationally produced “others” and “self” for travel writers and their audiences. Making the examination of the production of self through travel even more explicit, numerous feminist scholars have studied how travel and writing are gendered processes and how gender as a system of difference affects travel narratives’ production, publication, and consumption as texts (Blunt 1994a, b; Blunt and Rose 1994b). Within a U.S. context, travel and travel writing have been most strongly associated with westward continental travel (Kolodny 1984; Morin 1998, 1999) or trans-Atlantic movement (Mulvey 1983; Stowe 1994), and in only a few instances has the gaze moved from across the map to down the map, from east/west to north/south.7

In one of the few studies of travelers to the U.S. South, Anne Harris (1967, 3) focuses on the “army of travelers which invaded the South during its reconstruction,” a collection of writers whose texts “contributed to the creation of a persistent historical image of the era” (ibid., 21). Between 1865 and 1880, more travelers ventured to southern states than in any time period outside the Civil War (Harris 1967), and their postbellum travel accounts, through their publication in key northeastern newspapers and periodicals such as The Boston Advertiser and Scribner’s Monthly and their re-printing as popular books, informed conversations about the nation’s newly (re)conquered southern territory (Domke 1996). Postbellum travel accounts also provided an empirical basis for some of the first studies of the South’s reconstruction (Harris 1967), powerfully influencing subsequent approaches to the region. Working from the assumption that these writings were empirically correct and offered an accurate picture of the postwar South (ibid.), early scholars of the Reconstruction South brought postwar travel narratives into a new citational network and a new institutional structure in southern history, and their representations of the region and its features became the baseline for future discussions of the postwar South.

Apart from acknowledging these travel accounts’ importance in constructing historical narratives about the South, however, the question remains how to examine them in a manner that does more than provide general summaries of travelers’ findings or excise them from the broader contexts in which the texts were produced. Paul Carter (1987, xxi) suggests that when attention is given to the spatialities of description, to the connections between knowledge production and the spaces from which that knowledge emerges, the result is a spatial history that, in contrast to an empirical history about lands “already there,” raises new questions concerning how places themselves are produced through the acts of describing them and the production of knowledge about them (Duncan and Gregory 1999a). From a perspective that foregrounds the connections between the words that travelers penned and the spaces within and about which they wrote, the South’s geography becomes more than footing for transpiring events and, instead, a primary means by which those events can be conjured in the first place. Before turning to the details of this argument, I outline briefly the era of Reconstruction, the historical and geopolitical context within which the South became an imperial holding and the nation practiced future imperial projects.

An Imperial Project: Southern Reconstruction and Northern Travelers

Following the Civil War, the U.S. began a project of reconstructing the South, of occupying and attempting to rebuild the region socially, politically, and economically (for details, see Foster 1987; Cimbala 1989; Ayers 1992; Clinton 1992). Officially instituted in 1867, Reconstruction substantially altered the South’s social and material landscapes and positioned the region as a “new imperial holding” (Meinig 1998, 189). As an occupied territory, the postbellum South experienced a strong military presence through Union armies, imperial agents responsible for sociopolitical change in the Freedmen’s Bureau, wealth seizure through the abolition of slavery and the destruction of farmlands, and land exploration by the many northern men and women who ventured to and invested in the South.8 Drained of resources by the Civil War, the postbellum South rivaled the West as “a frontier of opportunity” (ibid., 191) for a time, and through this (re)opening, it became an exotic province to be explored.

Although most northern travelers approached the postbellum South as a defeated and occupied colony, the connections between the region and nineteenth-century colonialism and imperialism were always imperfect. The South, for example, was filled with white inhabitants who, although impoverished and seen as different from white northern travelers, did not resemble racialized “natives” found in other colonial contexts (Winders 2003). Furthermore, while some southern landscapes
were easily slotted into a long-standing distinction between a backward, decadent South and a progressive, active North (Kolodny 1975; Chaplin 1993), other southern scenes, especially in cities such as Atlanta, mirrored the bustle observed in parts of the North as well. These seemingly contradictory situations made attempts to describe the South problematic and complicated easy characterizations of the region, its peoples, and its landscapes. Although Boston newspaper correspondent Sidney Andrews (1866, 37), for instance, wrote of South Carolina that “we may treat this State as we please, – hold it as a conquered province or restore it at once to full communion in the sisterhood of States,” this either/or choice actually functioned as a both/and negotiation of a postbellum South’s place within the nation.

For this analysis, I reviewed published writings of northern travelers to the postbellum South, drawing primarily upon those travel narratives frequently cited by scholars of the region and the more exhaustive annotated bibliography of postbellum travelers published by Thomas Clark (1962). This collection includes both narratives that have been prominent in studies of the Reconstruction era and were written by well-known journalists or politicians of the era and texts that have remained relatively obscure within existing studies of the postbellum South, a point to which I return. From these works, I selected twenty narratives to analyze in detail, twelve of which are discussed in this article. The topics covered in these travel accounts that often ran over 500 pages are extensive. Many travelers, for example, devoted much space to political commentary on the postwar South, as well as to their own trials and tribulations as travelers in a war-torn region. Since many northerners journeyed to the South with the intention of publishing at least some portion of their accounts (Harris 1967), travelers often sought aspects of southern lands and peoples that would not only resonate with existing conceptualizations of the region but also carry strong currency in the postwar social and political climate. Here, I focus on the themes and topics that surfaced most frequently across texts and constituted the most prominent intertextual dialogues within these writings. Although other topics could have been lifted from these texts, the themes on which I focus were particularly strong across a variety of travel narratives penned by a diverse collection of writers and, as I argue, played key roles in the overall production of the South as an imperial holding.

Through the spatialization of description and commentary and through referencing different descriptive strategies in different places, these northern travelers created and relied on an intricate textual geography, the cumulative effect of which was a representation of the postbellum South as an imperial holding through the foregrounding of particular places in the region in relation to particular thematics and discourses. For the remainder of this article, I examine three thematics—discourses of civilization, descriptions of nature, and discussions of whiteness—that formed crucial, if at times contradictory, elements of a spatial strategy by which northern travelers came to grips with the paradoxical positioning of the South within the nation-state and the complexities of its reconstruction. These discourses formed constitutive elements of travelers’ approaches to an occupied South and enabled travelers to enlist the region’s own South and enabled travelers to enlist the region’s own geography as an organizing concept for their writings.

**Scripting the New Imperial Holding**

**Discourse of Civilization**

Although descriptions of an uncivilized or primitive South were in circulation as early as the 1750s (Hobson 1985), the events preceding and following the Civil War took the depiction of the South as uncivilized to a new level. The South at large was criticized for its backward lifestyles and social practices across postbellum travel accounts, but actual efforts to civilize the region and its peoples followed a mid-nineteenth-century “correlation between color and civilization” (Stocking 1994, 14) that led to recently emancipated African Americans who seemingly could be slotted into a discourse of the white northerner’s burden. As Robert Young (1995, 32) argues, the states of “civilization” and “barbarism” are entangled “in the mutually defining opposition that is supposed to set them apart,” and this was particularly true in discussions of civilizing missions and black southerners in the postbellum South.

Whereas many northern travel writers in the postbellum South described what could or should be done to improve the vanquished region, a smaller subset of northern men and women trekked to the South specifically to participate in those improvements, which they directed at freed blacks. Journeying to the region in large numbers, often with the support of northern aid associations, these counterparts to a northern military presence were complicit with broader efforts to position the South as an imperial holding. Although not all southerners, black or white, accepted the paternalistic benevolence offered by these northern men and women (Clinton 1992), many northerners felt someone had to take the initiative to uplift what one traveler called “this
Sodom of America” (Stearns 1872, 18) and, thus, persevered in their civilizing efforts.

During and immediately after the Civil War, then, white northern men and women migrated southward by the thousands to areas of so-called black self-rule that emerged as southern plantation owners fled Union forces and left thousands of slaves relatively free from white surveillance (Small 1979). Freed slaves were given formal control of these lands in 1865 (Cimbala 1989), but African Americans occupied islands off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia as early as 1861 (Rose 1964; Magdol 1977), sitting somewhere between freedom and slavery. These lands eventually became areas of black self-government and land ownership and, as I discuss below, key spaces within which northern travelers examined race relations and racialized categories in the South. Northern travelers’ discussions of such areas had material consequences, as the circulation and perpetuation of particular images of black southerners in these texts helped to relegate African Americans “to an economic, political, and social limbo for more than half a century after reconstruction” and to perpetuate the “myth of [their] inferiority” (Harris 1967, 200).

Although some historians have characterized these spaces of black self-rule as free from old white masters and new white bosses (Cimbala 1989), in many cases, white northern men and women were quick to colonize these spaces and temper any sense of total black autonomy. The Sea Islands, in particular, were areas to which white northerners frequently traveled and within which they tapped well-known tropes of black subjects in need of white aid (McChintock 1995; Kearns 1997; Wheeler 1999). On these islands, as well as in interior areas with large black populations, white northern missionaries, teachers, and farmers participated in the South’s reconstruction atop the material and social ruins of the ancient regime of slavery, a project that generated five to six million dollars of support in the decade after the Civil War (Swint 1941/1967, 3).

In this section, I examine some of these efforts at a southern civilizing mission through an analysis of the accounts of three northern men and women who ventured southward to work with emancipated slaves: Charles Stearns’s The Black Man of the South, and the Rebels; or, The Characteristics of the Former, and the Recent Outrage of the Latter (1872); Elizabeth Hyde Botume’s First Days Amongst the Contrabands (1893); and Mary Ames’s From a New England Woman’s Diary in Dixie in 1865 (1906). Although many similar accounts exist, the three narratives used here provide a good representation of the men and women who participated in these endeavors as, collectively, they cover an interior plantation and Sea Island communities and represent family and individual experiences. In examining how these three travelers enacted a civilizing mission within the postbellum South, I pay particular attention to the roles of white northern women. In the mid-nineteenth century, white women played an important part in civilizing missions at home and abroad (see Blunt 1994a, b, 1999; Morin 1998); and the postbellum South was no different (Small 1979). As teachers, missionaries, nurses, and soldiers’ wives, white northern women streamed to the South and, like white women in other imperial settings, became “the active agents of civilization” (Domosh 2002, 186), a discourse that is gendered in ways I discuss below.

Charles Stearns, an abolitionist born in Massachusetts, purchased a plantation in Columbia County, Georgia, in 1866 to experiment with southern black free labor. Stearns was not alone in his efforts; somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 northerners did the same after the Civil War (Currie-McDaniel 1992). From the beginning, Stearns experienced difficulty in managing his black laborers to his liking, as did many northern land owners in the South (Harris 1967). Physically threatened and accused by local white southerners for his work with southern blacks (Stearns 1872, 218), Stearns decided to leave the South in August 1870 after Georgia was readmitted to the Union and a northern military presence was removed. By 1872, he had sold his property to other settling northerners; he published his memoirs shortly thereafter.

Elizabeth Hyde Botume, also born in Massachusetts, taught for the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society from 1864 to 1869. Leaving New York in October 1864, she took a teaching appointment in Beaufort, South Carolina, and worked with other white northern teachers throughout her tenure. She remained in South Carolina until 1869, despite having to vacate the plantation she occupied and move into Beaufort at the Civil War’s end. Of her life apart from her time in South Carolina, very few facts remain. Her travel account was published some years after she returned to the North.

Even less is known of northern teacher Mary Ames. Apparently never married, Ames left her home in Springfield, Massachusetts, in May 1865 to work in a free black community on South Carolina’s Edisto Island, where she remained until September 1866. Although Ames was highly critical of the government’s treatment of black southerners, like many of the thousands of northern women who entered the South to teach after the Civil War (Currie-McDaniel 1992), she was associated with a local Freedmen’s Bureau. When it closed in June 1866, Ames was dismissed; her diaries were published forty years later in 1906.12
Stearns, Botume, and Ames were all determined to make their efforts at “ negro-elevation” (W. Reid 1866/1965, 95) successful and, along with other northern men and women, mediated black independence in a postwar South. They did so, however, fully cognizant that the color line demarcated the spatial and social lines of their influence. Confined to uplifting a collection of southern blacks whom white northern travelers described as “black illiterate, propertyless ... freedmen[s] in [sic]” (Harris 1967, 159) at the margins of the postbellum South, Stearns, Botume, and Ames inhabited a realm dripping with racial contradictions that sorely challenged their own racial and regional identities.

Stearns (1872, 171), for example, in his efforts at managing black free labor, lamented that only someone who had existed with “no society except that of the blacks” could understand “the deficiency in one’s life ... or the absolute solitude of our situation.” Worse than his own limited contact with white society, however, was that of his children. Southern historian Jacqueline J. Jones (1992, 343) suggests that, for children, the South’s “racial caste system seemed most flexible,” and that flexibility alarmed Stearns. As he watched his children mature in an all-black context, he found them “undergoing a rapid transformation from white to black” (Stearns 1872, 173). To his young daughter, Stearns often felt compelled to say, “all you need to make you a perfect black child, is to paint your face black” (ibid.). His daughter could move toward blackness simply by growing up in a social context lacking situations in which she learned to be white in the appropriate way. Through an unconvincing performance of a white identity, she placed in stark relief both the constructed nature of whiteness and the lengths to which northern travelers went to perpetuate a white sensibility in the South (Bhabha 1986; Dyer 1988).

As Stearns’s discussion of his daughter shows, the boundaries between blackness and whiteness were sometimes blurry in these spaces of black self-rule, and the maintenance of a white sensibility was a difficult task. This difficulty was often explained as a consequence of the social and spatial isolation of Sea Island and interior plantations, an isolation that was also understood to have harmful effects on black southerners. White northern travelers frequently described former Sea Island slaves as “the most ignorant and debased, beyond all question” (W. Reid 1866/1965, 94), a population “as ignorant as when brought from the wilds of Africa” (Trowbridge 1867, 533), and “the most degraded specimens of the race ... anywhere found” (Andrews 1866, 369).

The same isolation that created these “degraded specimens” of blackness complicated northern connections to a white identity, connections that could not be maintained through face-to-face contact with other white northerners. Thus, as in other colonial settings (McClintock 1995), material objects associated with a white, northern middle-class lifestyle held the capacity both to civilize black southerners and to signal the civil in white northerners. Botume (1893/1968, 131), for instance, in her work in Beaufort, endeavored to add household domestic items to her own daily life, as well as to that of the former slaves with whom she worked. Judging her black charges’ progress through their knowledge of such objects, she wrote that “needles and thread and soap and decent clothing were the best educators, and would civilize sooner than book knowledge” (ibid., 236). For Botume, these goods became vectors of a white northern civilization and made manifest the signs of black “improvement,” a practice of charting racial improvement through the use of domestic objects found throughout nineteenth-century imperial and colonial projects (McClintock 1995; Comaroff 1997). Through freed slaves’ use of domestic goods, the racialized social distance that created the project of racial uplift in the first place could be shortened (Kearns 1997), and Botume and others could read racial improvement through the acquisition and adoption of appropriate attire and personal habits (Domosh 2002).

For white northerners as well, the maintenance of their racial and regional affiliation required constant effort. In Stearns’s case, that maintenance came through his wife and the objects of domesticity she brought him as she circulated between North and South. When she returned from an extended stay in the Northeast and brought various household objects to Georgia, for example, Stearns (1872, 144) claimed that they began “to live like ‘white folks’ again,” the consumption of these northern domestic commodities reestablishing his racial and regional connection to a white northern identity. Nineteenth-century white women, guardians of the white race through their reproductive capacity (Ware 1992; Dyer 1997; Newman 1999), protected whiteness in this situation through a different carrying capacity. With his racial identity under threat from an overwhelming black presence and his regional affiliation weakened by virtual isolation from all things northern, Stearns turned to his wife and her domestic goods to “live like white folks” above the Mason-Dixon line. The articulation of a commodified domesticity and a white woman symbolically re-placed him within a northern white collective from which Stearns was spatially and socially separate, and white northern women became what Richard Dyer (1996, 172) calls “carriers of the values of whiteness.” Endowing their black charges with
material objects of civilization, as did Botume and Ames, and restocking their countrymen’s own racial privilege, as did Stearns’s wife, white northern women, in Ronald Walters’s (1973, 200) words, “carried civilization southward.”

This process, however, was not always smooth, as white northern women, more so than white northern men, walked a tenuous line in their attempts to uplift the black race. Although white northern women negotiated “the volatile postwar climate of the South” while “safely” cloaked in the reform/religious shield of respectability” (Currie-McDaniel 1992, 297), that shield of respectability was not impenetrable. Casting doubt on their own femininity through involvement with southern blacks and challenging their own racial privilege through virtual isolation in remote southern locations, these women, like white women in other colonial contexts (Mills 1991, 1994, 1996; Ware 1992; Blunt and Rose 1994b; Pollock 1994; Blunt 1999), played roles that were fundamental to, but precarious within, an overall imperial project in the South. Northern white women in the postwar South had to negotiate an ever-changing political and social landscape that shifted among black self-rule, northern white control, and returned southern white control (Foster 1987; Cimbala 1989). Scrutinized by northern and southern political leaders and required to justify their work to their benefactors, they staked their authority in a dynamic base that at times supported and at times undermined their position in a postwar South.

This tenuous position that northern white women occupied, however, differed little from that occupied by northern white men. Also forced to grapple with rapid changes in the region’s social and political climate, male travelers faced similar, if not identical, dilemmas (Domosh 1991). As Sara Mills (1994) notes, however, gender always makes a difference, and in the situation under discussion here, that gendered difference is inextricably bound up with the ways white northerners positioned themselves and were themselves positioned in reference to a broader project of occupying the postbellum South. In their efforts to bring former slaves to white standards and sensibilities, northern white women encountered not only the gendered constraints of being a woman in the nineteenth century but also the hard corners of an ill-fitted imperial framing of the South.13

This situation is particularly clear in Ames’s account. Although entering Edisto Island as a racially and regionally privileged white northern woman complicit with a broader intranational imperial project to civilize and educate darkened masses, toward the end of her stay, Ames (1906) encountered an abruptly attenuated social position. The black homesteading she observed on Sea Island plantations was limited from the beginning (Cimbala 1989), and white southern plantation owners began to retake their properties at the war’s end. In the midst of this white return to Edisto Island, Ames spoke out in a heated town meeting held by the homesteading black residents on impending white reappropriation of island property. In response to her public comments, Ishmael, a black community leader, showed that “he had learned the proper sphere of woman” by saying she had “(b)etter go into the house and attend to study” (Ames 1906, 121). Basing her position of authority on an association between whiteness and northern privilege, Ames had little remaining when that racial and regional authority was eclipsed by a gender inequality that excluded her from public meetings. When Ames strayed beyond the confines of the schoolhouse and into the role of contributing community member, she was quickly reminded of a woman’s place.

Louise Michele Newman suggests that in the late-nineteenth century, “white women’s rights activists measured the (lack of) social progress of non-white races in terms of their (lack of) conformity to Anglo-American Protestant middle-class gender relations” (Newman 1999, 7; see also Domosh 2002). If the same can be said of the Reconstruction era, Ames’s undoing as an authority figure through the black reinforcement of a gendered hierarchy was also evidence of a successful “civilizing” of freed African Americans on Edisto Island. This success, when paired with the white reappropriation of island property, ultimately left Ames (1906, 125), in her own words, with “no place” on Edisto Island, as the seemingly contradictory events of her success at “civilizing” freed slaves and the overall failure to maintain these spaces of black autonomy interacted to erode her position in the community.

As white plantation owners returned to Edisto Island to reclaim the homes that northern white teachers had temporarily occupied, Ames, like other northern white women, found herself with “no place” and left the South. To this point, Ames had approached her work as part of a broader project of racial and regional uplift in the postwar South. In the end, however, she palpably reached the limits of an imperial understanding of the South. Caught in what were becoming unsuccessful attempts to concretize black self-rule, she observed her influence chipped away. As northern philanthropists became dismayed at the Herculean task of erasing slavery’s effects, and as political corruption infused Reconstruction policies and practices, many white southerners quietly returned to their homes and social positions, replacing chattel slavery with sharecropping’s economic bonds (Fannin 2003).
For the three northerners under discussion here, the specter of white southern control always hovered at the margins of their imperial worlds. Whereas Stearns at least owned the land on which he lived, Ames and Botume, like most single northern white women, were at the mercy of white southerners returning to their homes. Thus, gender as a system of difference affected not only how these northerners participated in civilizing the South but also how they ultimately fared. Newman (1999, 20) argues that late-nineteenth-century “imperialism provided an important discourse for white elite women who developed new identities for themselves as missionaries, explorers, educators, and ethnographers as they staked out new realms of possibility and political power against the tight constraints of Victorian gender norms.” While Botume and Ames may not have fallen into the category of white elite women, the same discourse of imperialism of which Newman writes allowed Botume and Ames to assume new identities in the postbellum South as missionaries and educators and to participate in a project of racial uplift and reform in the South.

What was different about the development of these new identities in the postbellum South, however, returns to my overall argument about the imperfections and ambivalences of the South as an imperial holding in this era. In the end, Botume’s and Ames’s civilizing mission on the Sea Islands and interior plantations was dismantled from all sides, as white southerners returned and white northerners retreated physically and financially. The shift from a South open to a civilizing mission to one filled with white southerners left these northern white women “no place” and many others with only tenuous authority in the region. As such, it was a moment when the tensions of engaging the postbellum South as a colonial appendage or imperial holding surfaced, in Ames’s case, palpably. In addition to a discourse of civilization that was spatially, racially—and, as has been shown, temporally—limited, northern travelers relied on another thematic to support an imperial framing of the region: descriptions of nature.

Descriptions of Nature

As the “natural” counterpart to an industrialized North that had distanced itself from nature, the nineteenth-century South was understood to be significantly closer to, as traveler Sidney Andrews (1866, 374) phrased it, a “Nature . . . very kind in her gifts.” Known for lush, untamed landscapes and bountiful green agricultural scenes, the South was envisioned as an idyllic place with abundant resources and climatic attributes (Currie-McDaniel 1992). In the words of traveler Edward S. King (1875, 184), whose writings I subsequently discuss,

The beauty of the fair Southern land is but faintly shadowed in these pages. It is too intense to admit of transfer. But no visitor will ever forget the magic of the climate . . . (O)ne cannot forget the attractive wildness of the great western plains, nor the tropic luxuriance of the southern shore.

Concurrent with these scenes of verdance and luxury, however, the South was associated with the brutal and exploitative agricultural practices of a slave-based monoculture. Finding southerners’ agricultural habits unproductive and outdated, many northern travelers, although praising a nature “kind in her gifts,” leveled harsh criticism at the use of that nature in the South. Traveler and author John Trowbridge14 (1867, 143), for example, remarked that “where Southern State pride sees prosperous settlements, the travelling Yankee discovers little more than uncultivated wastes.” Southern historian C. Vann Woodward (1971, 13–14) considered this contradiction between a lush and lazy South a “fundamental aspect of Southern distinctiveness” typical of “Janus-faced” myths about the region. As I suggest below, this Janus-faced South was itself produced through a particular geography that made it appear somewhat less contradictory, at least in places.

In this section, I focus on the works of two northern travel writers: Edward S. King (1848–1896) and Sylvia Sunshine (1830–1914). Although almost all travelers devoted at least some space to discussions of nature in the South or a natural South, King, a well-known war correspondent and author, spent an enormous amount of time on the region’s natural features. In 1873 and 1874, he traveled more than 25,000 miles through the postbellum South with his artist-companion, J. Wells Champney, covering states as far north as Kentucky and as far west as Texas. King first serialized his writings in Scribner’s Monthly and ultimately published The Great South, a narrative that went through four editions (Harris 1967) and became the most widely read travel account of the era (Meinig 1998). After completing his travels, King moved to Europe, where he continued to write for the Boston Morning Journal until 1888.

If King is the best-known of northern postbellum travel writers, Sylvia Sunshine sits at the other end of the spectrum. All but ignored by scholars (cf. Eacker 1998), Sunshine wrote Petals Plucked from Sunny Climes (1880), an account that has become as obscure as the details of her life. Sunshine, pseudonym for Abbie M. Brooks, lived in Florida from the 1870s until her death in
1914 (Pope 1999) and traveled through Florida and Cuba some time in the late 1870s. Although Clark (1962, 25) considers her to be “one of those sickly lasses who hurried away to Florida . . . in search of health and history,” Richard Martin (1976) suggests that Sunshine was a pioneer in Florida historiography. According to recent research into Sunshine’s life, she was the “first American woman to research Florida’s Spanish history in the archives of Seville, Spain” (Pope 2000) and compiled some of the earliest translations of Spanish documents concerning the state’s history in five volumes that cover 1590 to 1810. Throughout the 1880s, Sunshine wrote freelance articles for southern and northeastern newspapers and in 1906 completed her second book, The Unwritten History of St. Augustine (ibid.).

Beyond this information, little is known of Sunshine’s identity, which she went to great lengths to conceal in her travel narrative, as well as in historical records (Pope 1999, 2000). Extremely critical of travelers and tourists who regurgitated scathing comments about the South, Sunshine gave advice to health-seeking travelers and everyday tourists. She filled her account with extended quotes from previous travelers to Florida and, in fact, borrowed heavily from King’s own collection of travel illustrations in her descriptions of Georgia and Florida. Sunshine’s travel narrative has been overlooked in existing studies of the Reconstruction era and postbellum travel writings more generally, but, as scholars in feminist geography have suggested, focusing on the writings of women “typically relegated to discursive margins” (Kay 1997, 364) can bring important insight into the gendered dimensions of travel, landscape description, knowledge production, and so on (McEwan 1994, 1996). For the remainder of this section, I discuss the writings of King and Sunshine, cheek by jowl, despite the distance between their texts in the existing canon.

King’s and Sunshine’s writings on nature in the postbellum South are of a piece with broader discursive strategies through which northern travelers scripted a “natural” South, and a brief discussion of these strategies can help to contextualize my analysis of King’s and Sunshine’s texts and the operations of gender with their writings. Pratt (1992) notes the lengths to which Europeans physically and metaphorically traveled to render South America in need of European leadership and involvement. While the imperial relationship between Europe and South America may be clearer than the intranational colonial connection under discussion here, the ideological approach Pratt outlines seems equally applicable to a nineteenth-century American South. Through various strategies, northern travelers scripted southern lands such that they needed the rationalized exploitation northern input could bring. Envisioning a defeated South materially and symbolically open to northern investors and explorers, these travelers translated the South’s natural features, wasted on southerners themselves, into potential resources. As Harris (1967, 204) suggests, for northern travelers in the postbellum South, the region “seemed like ‘Paradise Lost,’” particularly in its rural areas.

This rural distinction is important since, although most northern travelers made note of southern cities and their recovery attempts after the Civil War (Harris 1967), it was rural southern lands that received particular attention and were the spaces from which northern travelers could most effectively position the South as an imperial territory waiting to be tapped by northern investors. Before the riches in these rural areas could be harnessed, however, they had to be discursively positioned such that this harnessing was feasible through what Pratt (1992, 61) calls “textual apartheid.” Through the erasure of human traces from the South’s rural landscape, travelers described what would be seen after northern investors altered the region. Travel writer and well-known politician Whitelaw Reid (1866/1965, 238) wrote, for instance, on a train to New Bern, North Carolina, saw not the swamps that lined the rail tracks but, instead, the “splendid corn land” that “Yankee drainage” would soon produce. For E. S. King (1875, 311), Alabama and Mississippi, with a combined population of two million persons at the time, seemed “to an European or Northern visitor, almost uninhabited,” as the human presence on their landscapes was all but eliminated in his descriptions.

For many northern travelers, the postbellum South needed only “the magic wand of the capitalist waved over it” (E. S. King 1875, 488), a wand held firmly in northern (male) hands. As King wondered after weeks of journeying through the South, “(W)ho can compute the sum of the lost opportunities of the Southern States?” (ibid., 344). For John Paterson Green (1880, 91), the only published African American travel writer found for this study, “Yankee capital and enterprise” held the key to the region’s problems and would change southern wilderness into “a blushing garden.” Outlined by Caroline Merchant (1995, 137) as the “controlling image of Enlightenment,” this shift from wilderness to garden, from chaos to order, was feasible in the South only with northern effort and investment. In Whitelaw Reid’s words (1866/1965, 139), “in most places in the South, everything has stopped where nature stopped.”

Although northern travelers lambasted southern mismanagement of natural abundance across the interior rural South, it was at the region’s spatial and social
margins that travel writers wrote with greater freedom of the South as a colonial appendage and used well-known colonial tropes to describe "wild" nature. In places such as Florida and Texas, with sparse populations and "pristine" landscapes, travelers shifted both the voice and the view through which they described southern nature. Still frontiers in at least some sense of the word (Eacker 1998), these remote areas became sites through which northern travelers exercised an imperial persona with less interference from southerners, black or white.

E. S. King was one such traveler well practiced at using his colonial pen. In his extensive travels across the postbellum South, he spent long periods in Florida and Texas and connected descriptions of these lands to broader imperial projects around the globe. For King (1875, 379), Florida had "the charm of wildness, of mystery; it [was] untamed; civilization ha[d] not stained it." Traipsing around Florida’s Ocklawaha River, King wrote of “floating islands, of the grandeur and almost frightful calm of the mighty swamps...[that] had thrilled many a brain" (ibid., 409) and that “only a few had penetrated... until the prying Northern element demanded to be shown all” (ibid.).

Clearly gendered and sexualized, these passages dance around southern nature’s presumed femininity and the "prying Northern" traveler’s presumed masculinity. Through a metaphor of sexual penetration, a masculine northern force demanded the unveiling of “almost frightful" feminized retreats that had “thrilled many a brain” but remained lands “penetrated” by “only a few.” In Texas as well, King signaled the same connection between access to a feminized land and acquisition of knowledge when he noted that “(o)ne longs to leave the railroad, and plunge into the inviting recesses which he imagines must lie within reach” (ibid., 123). Writing of a desire “to course at free will” over these marginal lands (ibid., 199), King became the colonial white male explorer.

In deploying gendered and sexualized metaphors to describe southern lands, King was not alone, as the connection between landscape and feminized bodies was a common aspect of a nineteenth-century imperialism “imbued with sexual metaphor” (McEwan 1994, 74; see also Blunt and Rose 1994a). These same connections, for instance, can be seen in Sunshine’s descriptions of Florida. In her discussions of the same Ocklawaha River along which King traveled and wrote, Sunshine relied on similar connections between feminized imagery and southern nature. For her, the “pendant growth” along the river’s banks swayed “like the movements of magic, preparing a revelation from the secret abodes of wood-nymphs, or a debut from the weird form of some dark-eyed Indian maid” (1880, 55). Like King, Sunshine scripted natural scenes through exoticized and gendered bodies of wood nymphs and the racialized body of a “dark-eyed Indian maid.” Whereas King positioned a “prying Northern element” that demanded knowledge of the Ocklawaha’s watery retreats, however, Sunshine scripted an active presence that prepared to reveal itself. In contrast to King’s renderings, Sunshine’s unveiling is informed by choice, as nature, for Sunshine, debuts of its own accord.

Through this distinction, Sunshine’s somewhat different relationship to nature and her different authorial position become clear. In her description of the Ocklawaha, Sunshine did not unveil a feminized landscape but instead, scripted a “revelation” or “debut” of “wood-nymphs” and “dark-eyed Indian” maidens that revealed themselves. Despite this difference in who possesses the agency to “unveil,” Sunshine remained complicit with heteronormative conceptualizations of nature. In her writings, the link between nature and feminized imagery remained, and nature continued to be something to be unveiled and consumed for pleasure in the first place. Within one short passage, Sunshine’s challenge to and complicity with these gendered and sexualized representations of nature can be seen:

Nature poured forth her beauties in solitude, and from the dark recesses of the primitive forest-wilderness were echoed and reechoed the war-whoop of the Indian, the howl of the jaguar, the scream of the catamount, and the threatening growl of old bruin.

—(Sunshine 1880, 298, my emphasis)

Noting the hidden spaces of the “primitive forest-wilderness,” Sunshine signaled widely held associations among dark recesses, exoticized scenes, and feminized bodies, associations evident in King’s discussion as well. Unlike King, however, Sunshine did not position herself as possessor of these lands, as one who exposed or unveiled nature’s beauty. Instead, Sunshine gave nature the ability to “pour forth in solitude” without an audience other than Sunshine as the all-seeing author. While this distinction does not erase Sunshine’s complicity with the feminization and sexualization of nature and landscape in her travel account, it does show that the easy assumption of the role of imperial explorer at the margins of the South was dependent on an unspoken masculine subject position occupied in specific southern places whose descriptions facilitated a discursive connection between the South and occupied, exoticized territories elsewhere.

As I have argued in this section, a northern imperial gaze seemed to work with relative ease in the rural
South, where landscapes could be positioned by northern travelers as empty lands full of potential, and at the region’s social and spatial periphery, where nature could be aligned most closely with the imaginative geographies of colonial territories in circulation in the mid-nineteenth century. As was shown in an examination of Sunshine’s account, however, the fit of these marginal lands into a discourse of virginal lands and feminized spaces mastered by a northern explorer depended on a masculine subject position whose constructed nature was exposed in Sunshine’s ambivalence about how to script a feminized and sexualized nature (see Blunt 1994b). Although these two travel accounts that focus on the same sites have had little to say to each other across studies of the postbellum South, juxtaposing them here to compare their descriptions of nature in the postbellum South facilitates an analysis of the ways that particular representations of nature in the postbellum South were produced and the effect that these writers’ own subject positions had on such productions.

If an imperial approach to the postwar South was reinforced in descriptions of southern nature and in discussions of southern civilizing missions, at least in some places and for some northern travelers, this tactic fell apart when faced with other aspects of the region that challenged a clean division between what northern travelers observed in the South and how they understood their connections to that which they saw. For many northern travelers, white rural poverty in the South was an unsettling presence that challenged their ability to situate a postbellum South as entirely distinct from the North. In the final section of this article, I move through northern travelers’ reactions to poor white southerners to show what happened when a key aspect of an imperially held South came all too close to home.

**Discussions of Whiteness**

I have argued elsewhere that white rural poverty in the postbellum South was highly troublesome for northern travelers because it exposed not only the hollowness of the promise that whiteness guaranteed economic and social privilege but also the specter of an always imperfect division between white northern travelers’ own racial privilege and that of impoverished white southerners (Winders 2003). Here, I build on the second part of that argument about the imperfect division between white northern travelers and poor white southerners to show how the framing of the postbellum South as an imperial holding was always imperfect, especially in relation to whiteness.

White rural poverty in the postbellum South was intimately—and almost unanimously—associated with images of degeneracy and death. Across a range of travel narratives that often contradicted one another, held markedly different political views on the region’s fate, and otherwise had few moments of textual agreement, discussions of white rural poverty were eerily similar, as travel writers from a variety of backgrounds, and with a variety of missions in the South, described impoverished white southerners through a handful of discursive strategies whose repetition across texts created strong intertextuality around discussions of degenerate poor white bodies and their deathlike features.

Focusing on the degeneracy of poor white bodies, particularly poor white female bodies, northern travelers followed the pattern evident in Andrews’s presentation of the “native North-Carolinian…outside the cities and large towns”: “spindling of legs, round of shoulders, sunken of chest, lank of body, stooping of posture, narrow of face, retreating of forehead, thin of nose, small of chin, large of mouth” and his “leaner, more round-shouldered, more sunken of chest, and more pinched of face” wife (1866, 180–81), 21 In addition to describing poor white southerners as degenerate, northern travelers also relied on a discourse of death to discuss white rural poverty in the region. With skin that was “utterly without vitality, and beyond the action of any restorative stimulants” and had “a pitiful and repulsive death-in-life appearance” (ibid., 182), “cadaverous-looking” (Green 1880, 155) poor white southerners were consistently scripted through a language of death. Described as having “the same dead, pallid complexion” and “not…a particle of color” (E. S. King 1875, 774), these poor white southerners, in Sunshine’s description of them, were “standing specimens of humanity so thin a mosquito [sic] would be doing a bad business in trying to obtain sustenance from their bloodless bodies” (1880, 58).

Whether degenerate or deathly, “white trash,” as poor white southerners were often labeled in these travel narratives, became only slightly less disturbing when northern travelers assured themselves and their readers that such white rural poverty was not present in the North. In King’s words, poor white southerners had “counterparts nowhere among native Americans at the North incapable of producing such a peasantry” (1875, 346), and he was not alone in this claim (see, for example, Andrews 1866, 18, 223; Trowbridge 1867, 131, 348). In endeavoring to contain white rural poverty within southern spaces and maintain a distinction between their own whiteness and that observed in poor white southerners, however, northern travelers were
unsatisfactory. White rural poverty in the South looked all too familiar to these white northern men and women in ways that black southern poverty, for example, did not.

In addition to making a regional distinction that confined poor whites to the South, then, most northern travelers drew even tighter geographic boundaries around “cracker culture.” In southern urban settings, poor southern whites seemed less problematic for northern travelers and arguably more akin to white, immigrant poverty found in northeastern cities. In rural southern areas, however, as Andrews’s description of the “native North-Carolinian . . . outside the cities and large towns” (1866, 180, my emphasis) showed, white poverty was unacceptable (Harris 1967), and this situation returns my argument to earlier discussions of rural southern spaces, descriptions of nature, and an imperfect imperialism. If nature in the postbellum South was a key thematic through which northerners successfully scripted an imperial South, they could not treat impoverished white southerners as “natives” found within that natural abundance and remain within a nineteenth-century racial epistemology. In the mid-nineteenth-century “correlation between color and civilization” (Stocking 1994, 14), poor white southerners in rural areas were out of place. That southern blacks and southern nature, at least in places, matched a civilizing mission and facilitated an understanding of the South as an imperial holding was true. Impoverished white southerners, however, did not work in this framework. Not appropriately colored to be natives and not appropriately classed to be imperial agents, poor white trash were just enough to disrupt the imperial lens through which northern travelers scripted a postbellum South and to call into question the region’s existence as a distinct colonial appendage of the nation-state.

I have argued throughout this article that northern travelers grappled with diverse southern landscapes by spatializing their descriptions and relying on different southern locales to represent different aspects of colonial imaginative geographies of the region. Within that varied geography, travelers noted equally varied southern peoples. In E. S. King’s words, “(t)he social condition of the people varies with the location” (1875, 547). This statement, however, did not apply to poor white southerners, who not only were mis-placed within a natural South but also spatially excessive. As E. S. King (1875, 774) himself noted in a description of poor white southerners, “[o]ut of ten thousand people of this class, not one had in his face a particle of color; all had the same dead, pallid complexion.” Everywhere the same and seemingly everywhere, poor white trash were incorrectly white in all the wrong places (Winders 2003).

Pushing problematic poor southern whites to the rural South may have created spatial distance between travelers’ own connections to whiteness and these white southerners, but it was not sufficient distance for most travelers. In this time period, the South was understood to be almost entirely natural and rural; thus, expunging white trash to the countryside did not solve anything in a region dominated by rural landscapes. As traveler and author Mary Abigail Dodge4 (1867, 213) pointed out, “though we change the place, we keep the pain . . . of poverty in its naked repulsiveness, without concealment, without hope, and without shame.”

Dyer (1997, 36), in a discussion of whiteness in film, argues that the South “seems to be the myth that both most consciously asserts whiteness and most devastatingly undermines it.” While this claim seems likely, it speaks to more than constructions of whiteness and the South. The paradox of whiteness in the South as a category that represented both excesses of wealth and prestige in southern planters and excesses of poverty and lack in “poor white trash” can be positioned as symptomatic of a wider paradox of the postbellum South itself. Simultaneously a colonial holding and part of the colonizing nation, and possessing natives appropriately and inappropriately colored, a postwar South—through its associations with a civilizing mission, its relationship to nature, and its intimate connection to rural white poverty—was a contradictory space made even more so by northern travelers seemingly unsure about how to write about an imperial territory that was not imperial in the usual way.

Imperfect Imperialism in the Postbellum South

I am not the first to note the tensions in writings and representations of a postbellum South. From the first travel account written after the Civil War to many of the most recent studies of Reconstruction, people have pondered the South’s seemingly contradictory nature (see Ayers 1995). Here, however, I have attempted not to move beyond these tensions but maneuver within them. Working to push statements about a Janus-faced South (Woodward 1971) beyond declarative statements of how things were, I have argued that a theoretical perspective informed by postcolonial studies can facilitate an analysis attentive to the contradictions and complexities of the intranational imperial relations that contoured interactions with the South in the 1860s and 1870s.
Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (1998, 121) critiques versions of accepted southern history that focus on racism, ugly electoral politics, and white male perspectives for allowing “us to externalize and thus to expunge conditions that were American in scope without forfeiting our belief in America as a land of equality, innocence, and success.” Becoming a space of abjection (Sibley 1995, 1999; Cobb 2000), the South, through historians’ efforts to make an often blurry regional boundary somehow distinct, has stood as an “other” to and within the U.S. This article, through an analysis informed by postcolonial studies, has interrogated how those differences so important to generations of scholars and laypeople alike were produced in the 1860s and 1870s. An examination of the ways that postwar northern travelers came to know a South separate from a North begins the process of rethinking monolithic representations of the region and opens the door for more critical readings of southern texts. Whether spatializing conceptualizations of southern natures or attempting to contain white rural poverty, postbellum travelers constructed an intricate geography for and within their descriptions and adopted different voices and tapped different discursive practices in different places.

Foregrounding the dynamic nature of knowledge production in these postbellum travel accounts requires a reading of these writings that does more than accept them as unproblematic historical representations. Though certainly reflecting material conditions of a land devastated by a long and costly war, these travel accounts of the South capture the difficult process of reconfiguring the very place of a region concurrently in and out of the national body. Given their contemporary popularity in both serial and book form and their subsequent uses by historians and scholars of the region, they form an integral component of any engagement with a postbellum South and its relationship to the North/nation. Mona Domosh (2002, 183) argues that “the ideology of American turn-of-the-century economic imperialism was formulated from within, and built upon, the discursive construction of Anglo-American/Native-American relationships.” I am suggesting here that travel accounts of the South immediately after the Civil War, and the discursive practices through which the region was produced in these narratives, also form a key element of what would become practices of American imperialism at home and abroad at the turn of the nineteenth century (J. C. Rowe 2000).

The colonial or imperial relationship between North and South I have discussed in this article superficially seemed viable. In particular contexts, such as marginal lands in Florida and Texas, northern travelers occupied imperial roles relatively smoothly, although their actions, as well as their texts’ overall receptions, were influenced by mid-nineteenth-century gendered systems of difference (Mills 1994, 1996). This imperial relationship, however, by its own dialectical construction, was ultimately ambivalent (Bhabha 1986, 1990). The paradoxical place of a postwar South, concurrently part of the colonizing nation by virtue of reannexation and itself the very colonized space by virtue of that same reannexing, made an imperial South practically (im)perfect in every way.

This imperfect imperial relationship between North and South in which a postwar South was caught complicates any isolated treatment of the South in this era. Through an analytic framework informed by postcolonial studies and the emerging literature on North American postcolonial historical geographies, postbellum travel narratives that typically sit in the footnotes of historical examinations of the South can become texts within which to query how the Reconstruction South operated as a testing ground for future forays in American empire building and how discussions of it can be examined in the context of imperial practices outside the U.S. As the key space for nation (re)building in the 1860s and 1870s, before the emergence of an American empire in the late-nineteenth century (Kaplan 1993a), the postbellum South’s paradoxical location both within and outside the nation-state created an opportunity for the U.S. to work out the details of its own imperial practices in an imperfect imperial holding and to do so without ever leaving home.

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Notes

1. I use the phrase “North/nation” to reference the slippage between the North and the nation, particularly in a mid-nineteenth-century context.
2. Paired with the tendency to speak and write about the South as a unified region is a line of scholarship focused on the region’s geographical and cultural diversity (see Inscoe 1995; Hill and Beaver 1998; Reid 1999). I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to stress this point.
3. Despite these challenges to traditional representations of a South at odds with the rest of the nation, some scholars continue to locate a cultural lag that, in the face of the region’s changing political economy, maintains “the South
of the imagination" (Gray 1996; Gretlund 1999). This “fissure or divide between material change and mental alteration” (Gray 1996, 226), however, reproduces images of a South mired in its past and unable to keep pace with the remainder of the U.S.

4. Said’s argument is founded on a one-way line of influence from “the West” to “the Orient,” and his work has been criticized for silencing resistance to the West’s representations of the Orient (Bhabha 1990; Sprinker 1992). Although this unidirectional framing has less purchase in a postbellum U.S. South that participated in its own representation in various ways (see, for example, Hoge and Bayne 1879), the mechanisms, if not the specifics, of Said’s argument provide a theoretical framework for my analysis.

5. Although not deploying postcolonial theory, Joseph Persky (1992) has analyzed the characterization of the South as a colonial dependency in discussions of the region’s economic standing. His analysis does not consider the Reconstruction era.

6. In his examination of American empire, David Slater (1999) moves from the 1848 War with Mexico to the 1898 annexation of Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippine archipelago. Although this historical tracing of American imperial activities is not uncommon, it overlooks the role of the Reconstruction era in the South as both a time period and a space within which the U.S. worked out some of the details of how to be an imperial nation-state within the confines of its own territory.

7. An exception is Anne Rowe (1978), who traces temporal changes in approaches to the South but does so through novels. Christopher Mulvey (1983) looks at southern lands through the writings of British travelers. An extensive bibliography of postbellum travelers exists (Clark 1962), although it is not entirely accurate.

8. This historical narrative demands a caveat, as it creates a one-way transfer of knowledge, money, and power onto a passive and captive region. While making a nice story that northern travelers themselves liked to tell, things were not actually that simple in the South (Foster 1987).

9. Sidney Andrews (1837–1880) traveled through North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia in 1865, writing for the Chicago Tribune and Boston Advertiser and publishing his travels in book form in 1866. By his own admittance, Andrews focused primarily on the political activities of black and white southerners but wrote extensively of other aspects of southern society, particularly the white middle class and underclass. Andrews held an especially negative view of a postwar South and wrote bitterly of what he considered “Southern barbarism.”

10. Because of the postbellum South’s ambiguous place within the nation-state, the immediate postwar era was a particularly important time for the production and reiteration of a regional distinction between North and South. Although a regional binary did not capture every aspect of the postbellum relationship between North and South, in the travel accounts under discussion here, the distinction between the two regions seemed not only entirely natural but also in need of no justification for its ability to capture intranational postwar relations.

11. I also reviewed a handful of accounts by southern and British writers to contextualize the northern travel accounts on which I focus, although I do not discuss these other accounts here for lack of space.

12. In his bibliography of postbellum travel accounts of the South, Clark (1962) lists Mary Ames as Mary Clemmer Ames, a well-known journalist and author of the time period. This connection seems unlikely, however, since Mary Clemmer Ames retook her maiden name after divorcing her husband, Daniel Ames, in 1874. In addition, Mary Clemmer (Ames) died in 1884, and the Mary Ames under discussion here participated in the preparation of her diary for publication in 1906.

13. Within the context of poor black communities, white northerners’ class standing also bolstered their position. Outside this context, they, like other colonial men and women (Memmi 1967/1991), retained only a weak connection to middle-class social and economic privilege.

14. John Trowbridge (1827–1916) traveled through the South in 1865 and 1866 to see southern cities and Civil War battlefields. Best known for his friendship with Walt Whitman, Trowbridge wrote for Stebbins’s Publishing House, which sold his travel narrative by subscription. His account is one of the more popular writings of a Reconstruction South.


16. Whitelaw Reid (1837–1912), a journalist and Republican politician and diplomat, wrote for the Cleveland Herald and Cincinnati Gazette and gained wide acclaim for his Civil War coverage under the pseudonym “Agate.” He toured the postwar South on three occasions between April 1865 and January 1866, sometimes in the company of dignitaries like Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase and sometimes alone. After his travels, Reid assumed the editorship of the New York Tribune and held this position for many years. In 1889, he became minister to France and eventually returned to the U.S. to accept the vice-presidential nomination on the unsuccessful Harrison Republican ticket. In 1905, Reid was named ambassador to Great Britain, where he remained until he died. Reid’s travel account of a postbellum South has been widely cited, although he is primarily known for his political affiliations.

17. Ralph Brown (1948) notes that in South Carolina, the physical placement of roads along higher ground made the land seem thinly populated to visitors unfamiliar with the country, thus raising the possibility that, at least in South Carolina, these descriptions could be not only strategic but also inaccurate.

18. John Paterson Green was born in North Carolina in 1845 but moved at an early age to Ohio. In 1870, he returned to the South and settled in South Carolina. Traveling through the Carolinas in the summer of 1872, Green wrote much of southern black lore but very little of the actual places through which he traveled. Highly critical of southern white treatment of blacks, he supported black migration to northern and western states, advice he himself took when he returned to the North at the end of his travel account. The authenticity of Green’s account has been doubted by Clark (1962), who suggests that Green’s travel narrative may be an example of nineteenth-century Republican
propaganda, based on a letter found in one of the few remaining copies of the book.

19. King's 1875 text falls in the middle of what Gail Bederman (1995) considers a transition from "manliness," defined in terms of restraint and Victorian middle-class morality, to "masculinity," defined in terms of physical prowess and virility in the late-nineteenth century. Bederman connects this fin-de-siecle redefinition of manhood to discourses of racial dominance particularly around "civilization" in the era.

20. This harsher view of poor white southern women can be found throughout these travel narratives. See, in particular, the account of John William De Forest (1968), an author and Freedmen's Bureau agent in Greenville, South Carolina, from 1866 to 1867.

21. See also Andrews 1886, 183, 334–35, 338; Green 1880, 150; King 1875, 340; De Forest 1968, 63–64.

22. "White trash" emerged as a derogatory term for poor white southerners in the early nineteenth century through use by African American slaves. Over time, the label became incorporated into early twentieth-century discussions of racial degeneration and eugenics (Newitz and Wray 1997).

23. "Cracker" was also a popular derogatory term for poor southern whites. It, however, carried a stronger connotation of uncouth behavior and attitudes and, at times, was used to distinguish this group from poor white southerners more generally.

24. Traveler and author Mary Abigail Dodge (1833–1896) was born in Massachusetts and educated briefly at Cambridge University. Dodge was an early critic of domesticity and "white women's subordination within middle-class homes" (Newman 1999, 74), although she was also an active "anti-suffragist." Writing under the pseudonym Gail Hamilton, Dodge "emerged full-blown on the national journalistic scene in the 1860s" (ibid., 73) as one of the first female political correspondents and contributed to journals such as the Atlantic Monthly and the Congregationalist. In 1867 she traveled across the U.S. through various northern cities but south only as far as Chattanooga, Tennessee.


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